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ALAN
REVIEW

ASSEMBLY ON LITERATURE
FOR ADOLESCENTS

OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL
OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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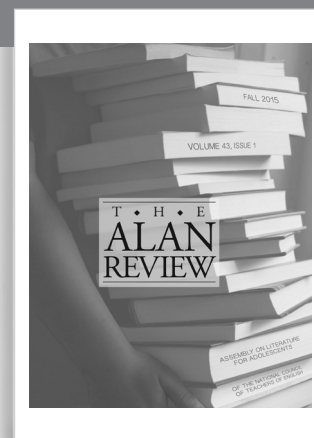
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Number 1

Fall 2015



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Instructions for Authors

ABOUT THE ALAN REVIEW. *The ALAN Review* (TAR; ISSN 0882-2840 [Print], ISSN 1547-741X [Online]) publishes articles that explore, examine, critique, and advocate for literature for young adults and the teaching of that literature. Published pieces include, but are not limited to, research studies, papers presented at professional meetings, surveys of the literature, critiques of the literature, articles about authors, comparative studies across genres and/or cultures, articles on ways to teach the literature to adolescents, and interviews with YA 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 young adult literature, librarians, YA authors, publishers, reading teachers, and teachers in related content areas. ALAN has members in all 50 United States and a number of foreign countries.

PREFERRED STYLE. Manuscripts should usually be no longer than twenty double-spaced, typed pages, not including references. A manuscript submitted for consideration should deal specifically with literature for young adults 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 young adults 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. The names of submitting authors should not appear anywhere in the manuscript. 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 from the copyright owner. YA author interviews should be accompanied by written permission for publication in TAR from the interviewed author(s). Interviewers should indicate to the author(s) that publication is subject to review of an editorial board. Original short tables and figures should be double-spaced and placed on separate sheets at the end of the manuscript. Notations should appear in the text indicating proper placement of tables and figures.

The ALAN Review uses the bibliographic style detailed in the *Publications Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA). Please adhere to that style when including in-text citations and preparing reference lists.

SUBMITTING THE MANUSCRIPT. Authors should submit manuscripts electronically to thealanreview@gmail.com. In the subject line, please write: ALAN Manuscript Submission. All manuscripts should be written using a recent version of Microsoft Word and use APA bibliographical format. Complete submissions include, as separate attachments, the following documents: 1) An abstract of no more than 150 words; 2) A manuscript without references to the author(s) and with name(s) removed in the Properties section under the File menu to ensure the piece is blinded; 3) A title page with names, affiliations, mailing addresses, and 100- to 150-word professional biographies for each submitting author, as well as 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 editors 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 made to the field of young adult literature and mission of *The ALAN Review*, scholarly rigor, and clarity of writing. Selection also depends on the manuscript's contribution to the overall balance of the journal.

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

Manuscripts that are accepted may be edited for clarity, accuracy, readability, and publication style. Upon publication, the author will receive two copies of *The ALAN Review* in which the article appears. Publication usually occurs within 18 months of acceptance.

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

FALL (October) Issue Deadline:	MARCH 1
WINTER (March) Issue Deadline:	JULY 1
SUMMER (June) Issue Deadline:	NOVEMBER 1

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From the Editors

Beyond Borders: Partnering within and across Schools and Communities

“Let me peer out at the world/through your lens./ (Maybe I’ll shudder,/ or gasp, or tilt my head in a question.)/ Let me see how your blue/ is my turquoise and my orange/ is your gold. Suddenly binary/ stars, we have startling/ gravity. Let’s compare/ scintillation—let’s share/ starlight” (Guenther, 2010, p. 6).

These words inspire us to remember the joy and play, the struggle and growth that can result from working with others. As busy educators, it is often easy to close the door, work through lunch, and attend to other business during meetings. But collaboration—the good kind—can help us learn more and find collective meaning in our work. Together, we can build connection and community; we can explore and understand difference.

In this issue, contributors present innovative, collaborative efforts that involve students, colleagues, and communities creating spaces for YA literature to flourish. They describe how they have generated ideas and implemented projects in the same building, in the building next door, or in settings across distances. They explain how they designed interdisciplinary curricula with those who study or teach subjects outside their areas of expertise. They share efforts to foster partnerships that invite young people to identify, explore, and propose potential solutions to problems they see in their communities. Regardless of the form these efforts take, and the complications and complexities they present, we are convinced that this work attests to the fact that “if you let people into your life a little bit, they can be pretty damn amazing” (Sherman Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, p. 129).

We begin this issue with a cooperative piece written by an impressive group of authors. “Using Nonfiction to Form Partnerships: A Collaborative Conversation” features a written dialogue between Marc Aronson, Marina Budhos, Jim Ottaviani, and Laurie Ann Thompson. These YA authors of nonfiction both model a collective process of creation and inspire readers to engage in partnerships within and beyond the classroom.

We then celebrate the unique opportunity we as YA readers have to engage with contemporary YA authors willing and excited to share their thinking. “The Many Iterations of Andrew Smith,” a lively speech delivered at the 2014 ALAN Breakfast in Washington, D.C., provides a glimpse into the myriad identities of Andrew Smith—the writer, the high school teacher, the father, and the imperfect person. This is followed by “Painted on the Surface: *The Marbury Lens* and Gore in Young Adult Fiction,” in which Robin Kirk examines a key scene in Smith’s 2010 novel to argue that gore, when used by authors to effectively illuminate character and reveal emotion, can create spaces for readers to work through messiness in their own lives. Drawing from textual analyses and an interview with the author, her assertions suggest value in the discomfort that can come from reading disconcerting words and passages.

Kristen Nichols-Besel, in her piece “‘A Very Likable Person’: Character Development in Louis Sachar’s *There’s a Boy in the Girls’ Bathroom*,” offers a thoughtful description of the potential for collaboration between scholars and libraries. She explores the importance of an author persevering through the

challenges of publication by illustrating Sachar's multifaceted drafting process—one that became evident after sorting through the original source materials of the Kerlan Collection, a children's literature research collection housed at the University of Minnesota.

Several articles in this issue present examples of partnerships generated between educators in various settings and roles. Lacey L. Bodensteiner and Karen J. Kindle's "Beyond Borders: A Partnership to Promote Independent Reading" describes the shared work of an interdisciplinary team of middle school teachers who implemented a schoolwide independent reading program that positively increased students' volume of reading, motivation, and attitudes toward reading.

Dawan Coombs and Maichael Mayans in "Insider or Outsider? Using Young Adult Literature and Experiential Learning to Understand the Other" discuss how students in a seventh-grade language arts class used YA literature partnered with simulated learning experiences to examine the perspective of "the other" and interrogate social norms as they explored what it means to be an insider and an outsider.

In "The *Wonder* of Empathy: Using Palacio's Novel to Teach Perspective Taking," Martha S. Guarisco and Louise M. Freeman describe how sixth-grade students' interpersonal skills shifted in response to an academic unit that emphasized characterization and analysis of perspective and included an empathy-building activity led by a guidance counselor. This work highlights the practical benefits of literary study in developing both academic and social skills in middle school readers.

And in their article, "What Are Book Clubs Doing in *Health* Class? Enhancing Learning and Making Empathetic Disciplinary Connections through Young Adult Novels," Lynn Hunt Long and Lesley Roessing investigate how a partnership between faculty in two seemingly disparate university programs led to the use of YA literature circles in a current issues health education class.

This issue also offers readers an example of an innovative collaboration that extends across several community partners. In their piece, "The Book Battle: Using Service Learning to Collaborate with a Young Adult Library," Jacqueline Bach, Charity Cantey, Jay LeSaichere, and Kylie Morris invite readers into the Book Battle, a trivia contest in which contestants answer questions based on popular young adult fiction. The event encourages connection and reflection

by bringing together teen readers, students enrolled in a university YA literature course, a library's outreach program, and preservice teachers engaged in field experiences.

Our incoming columnists and column editors begin their work with this issue—and we're thrilled with the result. In her first Book in Review: A Teaching Guide column, "Trying to Find Themselves: Teen Literary Characters in Search of Identity and the Right Paths," Barbara Ward provides teachers with resources and ideas for two texts, *We Can Work It Out* by Elizabeth Eulberg and *The Kidney Hypothetical or How to Ruin Your Life in Seven Days* by Lisa Yee. Characters in both books deal with issues of identity and seek ways to change the world around them through partnerships with others in their communities.

In their inaugural Right to Read column, "The Books That Will Never Be Read," James Blasingame and E. Sybil Durand collaborate with authors, attorneys, and local community members to examine how books come to be challenged and how unjustified challenges can be addressed. We hear from YA authors Laurie Halse Anderson, Jack Gantos, Lauren Myracle, Chris Crutcher, Bill Konigsberg, and Matt de la Peña and learn about curricular battles waged in politically torn school districts and the responses of school board members and district administrators.

Our Layered Literacies column, "Layering Meaning across Literate Practices," features new column editors Sandra Schamroth Abrams and Hannah R. Gerber. Their piece explores the multidirectionality and fluidity of layering literacies in online and offline realms to promote meaning making for readers.

We end this issue with two pieces that serve as reminders of the power of connection in whatever form it might come. "I Wanna Be Rich" by esteemed YA author Paul Griffin paints a powerful portrait of the students with whom he has worked in a variety of school settings. His impressions capture and portray the wide array of circumstances they face and the stories they share, reminding us of the importance of listening, valuing young people as individuals, and believing in their capacity to achieve. And in "Sign My Cast," classroom teacher and poet L. A. Gabay offers a thoughtful and emotionally difficult tribute to Ned Vizzini, a YA author who suffered from depression and took his life in 2014. The piece highlights the need for hope in desperate times and the essentiality of connecting with others.

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- Alexie, S. (2007). *The absolutely true diary of a part-time Indian*. New York, NY: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.
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Call for Manuscripts

Submitting a Manuscript:

Manuscript submission guidelines are available on p. 2 of this issue and on our website at <http://www.alan-ya.org/page/alan-review-author-guidelines>. All submissions may be sent to thealanreview@gmail.com.

Fall 2016: Rethinking “Normal” and Embracing Differences Submissions due on or before March 1, 2016

“To be careful with people and with words was a rare and beautiful thing” (Benjamin Alire Sáenz, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, p. 324). With these words, Sáenz points to the sacredness of language, particularly as we use that language to build up or tear down those we know—and those we don’t. We use language to discriminate differences and to make sense of and give meaning to our perceptions, but being discriminate can result in unfair judgment—both subtle and overt—when we fail to consider the unique stories of those to whom we assign our assumptions.

In this issue, we invite you to consider how language, woven through story, can invite exploration of difference centered on (dis)ability, sexual identity or orientation, gender, race, nationality, culture, age, and/or physical appearance. How might young adult literature help readers consider their own and others’ uniqueness? How might it challenge deficit perspectives of the other that are too often forwarded by the dominant narrative? What difficulties result from such attempts at engagement in educational settings? How can we help adolescent readers understand that “[A] person is so much more than the name of a diagnosis on a chart” (Sharon M. Draper, *Out of My Mind*, p. 23) and ask themselves, as they grow up in a labels-oriented world, “You’re going to spend more time with yourself than with anyone else in your life. You want to spend that whole time fighting who you are?” (Alex Sanchez, *The God Box*, p. 139)?

Winter 2017: Story and the Development of Moral Character and Integrity Submissions due on or before July 1, 2016

As lovers of literature, we want to believe that, through books, adolescent readers may gather insights and knowledge that support their efforts to make sense of themselves and others. That while accessing worlds they might never know, they broaden their perspectives and experience vicariously decision-making processes that parallel those encountered in their lived realities. And yet, if fiction has the power to achieve this good, might it also have the capacity to engender the bad?

It might be true that “It’s a lot easier to be lost than found. It’s the reason we’re always searching and rarely discovered—so many locks not enough keys” (Sarah Dessen, *Lock and Key*, p. 365). We might “envy the trees/ that grow/ at crossroads./ They are never/ forced/ to decide/ which way/ to go” (Margarita Engle, *The Lightning Dreamer*, p. 138). But sometimes we need to consider the difficult possibilities, and “sometimes the best way to find out what you’re supposed to do is by doing the thing you’re not supposed to do” (Gayle Forman, *Just One Day*, p. 125).

We invite contributors to consider the complex moral interactions that might occur when adolescent readers enter a text, particularly one intended for them as young adults. Can young adult literature (YAL) foster opportunities for readers to assess what might be right and what might be wrong—and who decides? Can YAL provide avenues for exploring dark, forbidden paths? Can YAL reinforce or challenge belief systems contradictory to those grounded in democratic values of equity and social justice? Can YAL foster more empathetic and nurturing dispositions and behaviors among young people? Or are we overestimating the power of story?

As always, we also welcome submissions focused on any aspect of young adult literature not directly connected to these themes.

Using Nonfiction to Form Partnerships:

A Collaborative Conversation

From the Editors: We are pleased to feature a written conversation among several authors of young adult nonfiction. These authors encourage readers to find real-world relevance in their texts and inspire young people to take action. We hope you agree that their diverse approaches and perspectives fostered rich conversation about the concept of partnership.

As to process, we generated and sent a series of questions to all of the authors at once. We compiled the initial responses they shared into a single document and then, over several iterations spanning several months, we sent the compiled version back and forth to authors to solicit questions, elaborations, and revisions until all were satisfied with the end result. We hope this piece both engages readers and generates ideas for further collaborations using nonfiction.

Can you tell us a little bit about your recent work(s) of nonfiction and how you were inspired by the topic(s) you chose?

Marc and Marina: The first book we wrote together was *Sugar Changed the World* (2010). As we say in the book, it came about because we knew that sugar had played a key role in the Indian side of Marina's family, but while we were in Jerusalem visiting with Marc's originally Russian family, we learned that there was a sugar link via a beautiful and mysterious aunt of his. Thinking about one substance that had a dramatic effect on two very different families inspired us to research and then write the book.

Just now we are working on a new joint project, which is itself in large part about artistic collaboration. The inspiration for *The Eyes of the World* came out of a very different conversation. We were in Montpelier to speak at the Vermont College Master of Fine Arts program. Marina began talking about photography with Walter Dean Myers, who was researching a heavily photographic work centered on African Americans and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Marina, who has always had a passion for photography, and especially the Magnum photographers, suddenly realized that the story of Robert Capa, his less-known girlfriend Gerda Taro, and the romantic idealism of the Spanish Civil War would make a great topic for a young adult book.

Laurie: My recent nonfiction titles, a teen how-to and a picturebook biography, both evolved from the same idea. I've always been a fan of underdog stories and unsung heroes, so I was working on a collection of profiles of people who have changed the world but are not well known. When I heard about Emmanuel Ofose Yeboah—a young man who was born disabled in Ghana and overcame social stigma and discrimination to fight for rights for disabled people—I knew his story had to go in my book. While searching for others to include, I read David Bornstein's *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas* (2007), which is full of amazing case studies of changemakers around the world. I thought a book like that, but

with even more actionable how-to advice, needed to be written specifically for teenagers to empower them to act on their passion and idealism. That was the beginning of *Be a Changemaker: How to Start Something That Matters* (2014). Eventually, an agent told me she loved the profile of Emmanuel and wanted to see it as a stand-alone picturebook, so *Emmanuel's Dream* (2015) was born. I'm grateful for the path that led me to these books, but I hope I'll eventually get to do the original book about unsung heroes, too!

Jim: My most recent published works are about Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Biruté Galdikas in *Primates* (2013) and Alan Turing in *The Imitation Game* (2014) (no relation to the feature film of the same name, even though it's also about Turing. We arrived at the same title independently, I'm sure). *Primates* is a triple biography, if there is such a genre, that shows how these three scientists came to revolutionize the field of primatology. It follows their early careers and major discoveries, and it shows how they became much more than scientists—not that being a scientist isn't enough in and of itself, of course! *The Imitation Game* tells the tragic story of Alan Turing who, as a mathematician, code-breaker during World War II, and computer scientist, laid the groundwork for many aspects of modern technology. He was also openly gay in a time and place where that choice was not only discriminated against but criminalized. He paid a high price for his decision not to hide who he was, and the world is poorer for that.

How do you select your topic(s) for writing? Do you form your own partnerships (for information, guidance, etc.) in the writing process?

Jim: When it comes to selecting topics, I've only ever followed my nose, so to speak. I began writing comics about scientists because over the course of my early career as a nuclear engineer, I had encountered so many interesting anecdotes about the people behind the equations and discoveries I learned about and relied on in my work. Since then, there has always been a new person, discipline, or discovery that has drawn me in—and

done so just as I was beginning to think about what I should do next. I've been very lucky!

I have indeed formed most of the partnerships as each project developed. Whether it is reaching out to an archive or an artist, I have usually taken that first step, and here again I have always been fortunate to have my interests met more than halfway by whomever I've approached. People like science, and they like comics!

Laurie: I write about things I want to learn more about and stories that I feel need to be shared.

I have a wonderful critique group and a talented agent, all of whom I rely on for feedback. And once a project has been acquired by a publisher, a whole team of people step in to bring a book to life: editors, illustrators, designers, copyeditors, proofreaders, cover artists, production specialists, and more. I don't always get to know these people, but I'm grateful for their skilled contributions to my books.

In addition, every book lends itself to unique, focused partnerships. For *Emmanuel's Dream* (2015), I partnered with the Ghanaian Association of Greater Seattle for fact checking and background information as well as with Emmanuel himself, who answered my questions by email, phone, and in person and supplied me with reference photos. For *Be a Changemaker* (2014), I partnered with Ashoka's Youth Venture, a non-profit that supports young changemakers. They helped me find young people to interview, and I volunteered with them and met some of the teens in person. I fell in love with their organization and the great work that they do here and around the world. I was extremely honored when Ashoka's founder, Bill Drayton, wrote the foreword for *Be a Changemaker*.

Marc and Marina: The truth is, collaborations, or partnerships, are at the center of our life together as husband and wife and coauthors. We confer with each other all the time in our private lives while parenting, while working on our house, while planning our future travel, and in our separate work as writers. We are both fascinated with how the voice and a perspective of another person can amplify or clarify the process of creation.

When it comes to the books we write together, the topic has to be one that we are both drawn to—though our interests may not be identical. In general—this was true in *Sugar* (2010) and again in *Eyes* (in preparation)—Marc is more drawn to historical context and large issues of politics, culture, society, vast trends, big conclusions; Marina—who is also a novelist—has her own interest in big ideas, context, and history, but in her writing, she tends to build toward them through story, character, and drama.

This is not absolute, as Marina follows issues of international politics and policy more closely than Marc does, and Marc—who was long a YA editor—is drawn to fast-paced drama and examples of moral passion. Still, in general, Marc will tend to read many academic background books to understand, for example, how experts have described Europe in the 1930s. He is interested in assimilating the interpretations of professional historians, to make them accessible for a young reader, and to prompt his readers to ask questions about history. Marina's interest is in recreating and explaining, giving a glimpse of unknown perspectives and events through evocative, strong writing.

Sugar (2010) covers vast spans of time and place, so Marc did most of the writing, while Marina edited and rewrote, pushed for more human moments, and wrote chapters related to her own heritage, where she had done a lot of research and looked at primary documents connected to sugar growing.

For *Eyes of the World* (in preparation), Marina read everything that is either available in English or that she can make her way through in French or German about the lives of Robert Capa and Gerda Taro. Then she plunged into writing a draft from start to finish, while Marc studied the broader history. Together, we pored over primary documents—like interviews, letters, and photos at the International Center for Photography—for those pungent details that can make a narrative book come alive. In a reverse of *Sugar*, she handed over the manuscript to him, and he is now adding other elements—the volunteers on both sides of the conflict, for instance—and editing and shaping the

final product.

In your own schooling or visits to schools, have you seen any particularly beneficial or inspirational partnerships?

Jim: I see them all the time, though it's hard to pinpoint any single one that's more deserving of mention than all of the others. I guess the thing I would note is how many excellent independent bookstores that I've had a chance to work with also have partnerships with schools.

Marc and Marina: One school that Marc learned about asks older students, say those in upper elementary or middle school, who have written research reports to present those reports to younger students. The older students, knowing how restless younger kids are, learn to be concise, dramatic, engaging, while providing a goal and model for the younger students.

Laurie: I've seen several excellent partnerships between Ashoka and high schools where Youth Venture facilitators teach business or leadership courses. These facilitators walk students through the process of choosing, researching, and launching a socially conscious business or nonprofit. The students learn the same skills they would with more traditional coursework, but they are more motivated and engaged because they get to work on a problem they care about and can have a real influence on.

I've also had the opportunity to work with schools where students participate in service-learning projects as part of the curriculum. In some cases, students research a problem, find organizations in their community that are working to solve that problem, and then fundraise and/or volunteer for those organizations. In others, students start their own service organizations. These service-learning-centered units seem particularly beneficial because students focus on a problem that matters to them personally while they achieve interdisciplinary learning outcomes and contribute to their communities all at the same time.

In what ways do you envision your texts, or non-fiction in general, might be used to promote interdisciplinary partnerships within schools? In the community or world?

Laurie: *Be a Changemaker: How to Start Something That Matters* (2014) is a how-to guide that helps teens start their own organizations to effect real social change in their communities or around the world. Nonfiction, particularly this kind, can play a key role in providing students with the background knowledge and inspiration necessary to take action. Those actions often lead to collaboration and partnerships with other students, with teachers across various subject areas, and with experts and organizations from the larger community and around the world.

Marc and Marina: We were thrilled when both New York and Louisiana built modules for English Language Arts (ELA) teachers around *Sugar* (2010). In the past, publishers believed that nonfiction needed to be ruled by the scope and sequence of Social Studies departments. But here, students in ELA classes use our nonfiction book to learn about evidence, argument, point of view, main and subsidiary points, and also to investigate moral issues. We could not have asked for more.

Eyes (in preparation) presents what is both an opportunity and a challenge: many great artists were involved with the Spanish Civil War—from Pablo Picasso and Federico Garcia Lorca to Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson and, of course, Ernest Hemingway. Our book is about photography, but it could link to media studies, to social studies, to art, to film, and to ELA. The challenge is that neither Hemingway nor the Spanish Civil War is still taught in most high schools. We will have to hope that, as with *Sugar*, the book opens eyes in schools rather than already fitting what schools know they want to do.

Jim: A comic book story—or graphic novel, if you prefer—is told with words and pictures working together to produce something that (if the artist and I do our jobs well) is greater than either could do on their own. So combining art and prose, storytelling and science, I think (I hope!) points to the strength

and power of interdisciplinary partnerships. It's all right there on the page.

How is nonfiction unique in its ability to afford opportunities for readers to make meaning of their world? How might collaboration play a role in this search for meaning?

Laurie: Nonfiction helps readers understand their world by providing them with information. With more information, they can make more connections and develop broader perspectives. Collaboration also allows people to make connections and broaden perspectives by sharing unique experiences and expertise.

As our world continues to change at an ever-increasing pace, the most successful people will be those who are able to acquire information quickly and then work collaboratively with others to solve our most complex problems. Having students read nonfiction texts and then apply what they have learned offers excellent opportunities for them to practice both of these increasingly critical skills.

Jim: The thing is, I don't think nonfiction *is* unique in this, because fiction makes meaning, too. But nonfiction presents its characters in a reality that we all share, even after we set the book down. So though nonfiction puts "imagination in a tight straightjacket," to quote Richard Feynman (Sykes, 1993), it also shows readers what's possible for real people to do—and be.

Regarding collaboration, the age of the lone genius making a breakthrough in his lab or discovering and solving equations by herself at her desk is gone. (Mostly. I think. I'll probably be proven wrong before this gets published.) Collaboration is how science gets done, so it doesn't only play a role, it plays a *leading* role in the search for meaning.

Marc and Marina: There is a weird truth about nonfiction: young children and adults know they love to read nonfiction, but at the heart of K–12 education, nonfiction is often viewed as a lesser form of book—good, at best, for reports, and a close cousin to that hated beast, the textbook. Yet there are always students who are more drawn to understand

the world through direct inquiry and evidence—history, science, math—than through fiction, plays, or poetry. Fiction, plays, and poetry can be compelling; truth telling can shape how we experience the world. But that does not mean we should assume that they are the only kinds of writing that can do so. For Marc, the key is that nonfiction—however well told—must inherently involve inquiry. The authors must have searched for and found evidence that they have pieced together and presented. Thus, nonfiction can show readers a passageway toward their own insight and understanding—ask questions, seek evidence, develop theories, test your theories, make claims. Nonfiction can be and should be exploration.

Have any specific people in your life inspired your writing? What message(s) do you hope your readers take away from your books?

Marc and Marina: In *Sugar* (2010), the fact that the British (who made more money in sugar slavery than any other nation) were the first to finally abolish slavery shows that we can make difficult choices—a key issue now as we face questions about climate change. In *Eyes* (in preparation), we see that two artists can work together as equals—critiquing each other, improving each other—and that there is real heroism in being a journalist, a photographer, who risks everything to tell the world about a truth she or he is determined to share . . . at any price. We could not help but see the parallels between the massive demonstrations in Paris after the January Charlie Hebdo murders and the massive demonstrations in exactly the same square in the 1930s. As we face the dramas of today, we can be inspired by the artists and heroes of yesterday.

Jim: I aspire to write as well as any number of people, ranging from Doris Kearns Goodwin to George Herрман—to pick two almost polar opposites in terms of style and substance—but I’m too close to my own writing to pinpoint anyone specific who has inspired how I write.

As for the messages, here again I can’t pick just one, but maybe I can sum them up using the

very last words of the very last *Calvin and Hobbes* (Watterson, 1995) comic strip: “It’s a magical world, Hobbes ol’ buddy . . . let’s go exploring!” The word “magical” may seem odd to describe a message coming out of science comics, but the most inspiring scientists have the sense of wonder that we associate with magic, and I hope that comes through in the books I’ve written.

Laurie: My parents always told me I could do anything or be anything I wanted to be, but unfortunately others weren’t always so encouraging. I remember being told that I was too short, too shy, too sensitive, too female, too something . . . or not enough of something else. It felt like everywhere I turned, there were people telling me I couldn’t. I want to tell my readers that they can. And I want to give them the tools to go out and do it.

Marc Aronson earned his doctorate in American History at New York University while working as an editor at what was then Harper & Row in the children’s books division. The first winner of the Robert F. Sibert Medal for Excellence in Informational Books from the American Library Association for *Sir Walter Raleigh and the Quest for El Dorado* (2000), he has gone on to write about the Salem witch trials, the rescue of trapped miners, and the idea of Race, and has collaborated with scientists and historians. Aronson now trains librarians at the Rutgers School of Communication and Information and speaks frequently to teachers, librarians, and students about the Common Core State Standards. He lives with his wife, Marina Budhos, and their two sons in New Jersey.

Marina Budhos earned her Master’s degree at Brown University and writes fiction and nonfiction for adults and teenagers. Her recent books include the award-winning YA novel *Ask Me No Questions* (2006), *Tell Us We’re Home* (2010), and the forthcoming *Watched*. Having grown up in a multiracial family in a community largely made up of families involved in the United Nations, she is intensely interested in the experiences of immigrants—those who see dominant cultures from an outsider’s perspective. She wrote *Remix: Conversations with Immigrant Teenagers* (1999) as a nonfiction exploration of some of the themes she then investigated in her novels. Ms. Budhos is an associate professor at William Paterson University where she teaches courses in Asian American literature, young adult literature, and narrative nonfiction.

Jim Ottaviani is the author of many graphic novels about scientists, ranging from physicists to paleontologists to behaviorists. His most recent are the New York Times bestsellers, *Primates*, about Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Biruté Galdikas, and *Feynman*, about Nobel-prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman. His books are probably the only ones to have received praise from both *Nature* and *Vampirella Magazine* and from publications as diverse as *Physics World*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Discover*, *Variety*, and *Time*. His upcoming books are *The Imitation Game: Alan Turing Decoded*, a biography of Alan Turing illustrated by Leland Purvis, and *Hawking*, illustrated by Leland Myrick. He lives in Michigan and comes to comics via careers in nuclear engineering and librarianship. Visit him at www.gt-labs.com, on Twitter at @gtlabsrat, and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/jim.ottaviani.

A former software engineer, **Laurie Ann Thompson** writes for children and young adults to help readers—and herself—make better sense of the world we live in, so they can contribute to making it a better place for all of us. She writes nonfiction that gives wings to active imaginations and fiction that taps into our universal human truths, as seen in her books *Be a Changemaker: How to Start Something That Matters* (2014), a teen how-to guide filled with practical advice and inspiration for young social entrepreneurs; *Emmanuel's Dream: The True Story of Emmanuel Ofosu Yeboah* (2015), a picturebook biography of a young

man who changed Ghana's perception of people with disabilities; and *My Dog Is the Best* (2015), a fiction picturebook about the bond that exists between a child and a beloved family pet. Visit her at lauriethompson.com and on Twitter at @lauriethompson.

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The Many Iterations of Andrew Smith

Speech delivered at the 2014 breakfast of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English, Washington, D.C.

If I had to write a speech to get into heaven, I would choose to go to hell, where they would probably force me to write speeches.

The biggest trouble I had in figuring out the content of this talk was this: Which Andrew Smith should give this speech? I've brought along several and stitched them all together—Andrew Smith the writer, the Andrew Smith who's a high school teacher, the Andrew Smith who's a father, and the panic-attack Andrew Smith who's not very good at giving speeches over breakfast. Andrew Smith the author does not let Andrew Smith the teacher display the books he's written in his classroom. This isn't a censorship thing; it's more an issue of sovereignty.

Okay. So I wanted to say something about this book I wrote that's coming out in March. It's called *The Alex Crow* (2015). In it, the main character, a refugee boy named Ariel, wakes up after falling asleep inside a refrigerator while he's dressed in a clown suit. He is the sole survivor of an attack on his little town. When he's saved by America—which is what America likes to think it's good at—he's sent to a summer camp for boys who are addicted to technology, even though he's never used a cell phone or played a video game in his life. Just so you know, there's also a schizophrenic bomber called the melting man who talks to Joseph Stalin and two other occupants of the motel of his brain, named 3-60 and Crystal Lutz, an accordionist. And there's an icebound barkentine steamer on a failed voyage to the North Pole in the 1880s, a small man frozen in ice who may or may not

be the devil, the possibility of the eradication of all males from the human species, and an extinct-but-then-not-extinct suicidal crow named Alex.

Just thought I'd put that out there.

In the acknowledgments to *The Alex Crow*, I include a statement of gratitude to my English Language Learner (ELL) students—the incredible survivors who introduced me to the novel's protagonist, that refugee kid named Ariel.

There is a real Ariel. He came from Syria. His family left behind everything they had and got out of the country when the civil war there was getting particularly nasty. It was a good idea, because the real Ariel's family is Christian and came from a place that is currently controlled by the Islamic State movement.

The first day Ariel sat in my classroom was just a few days after he left the chaos of Syria. Imagine that! It also happened to be one of the days when I read aloud to my kids, and I was reading from Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) (yes, I go there)—the part about how ridiculous, when you think about it, the lyrics to our national anthem are.

The real Ariel was very confused.

And I said, "Welcome to America, kid," a line that's repeated to the Ariel in my book.

That was a few years ago now. Now, the real Ariel's younger brother—his name is Eli—is a student of mine. The kid is brilliant. He speaks Arabic, French, English, and Spanish. I don't want the administration to find out how well he speaks, reads, and writes English, because I don't want them to take him away from me.

About a month ago, Eli asked me if he could see one of the books I'd written. Andrew Smith the teacher keeps Andrew Smith the author's books locked up inside a cabinet. I also have a singing Justin Bieber doll in there that was a gift to me from a former student. And no, I don't know why.

So I unlocked the cabinet and grabbed a copy of my novel *Winger*. And I watched as Eli opened it up and started reading. About halfway through page one, Eli's jaw dropped and he looked at me and said, "Mr. Smith! There's a bad word in this!" And I said, "What do you mean *there's a bad word in it*? Is it misspelled? Is the printing messed up? What do you mean *bad*?" Eli pressed his index finger down on the page and said (just like this) "No. Mr. Smith, it says *fuck*."

I love it when kids go there with me, because I give them my sermon on what the bad words really are, which goes something like this:

Fuck is not a BAD WORD, Eli. It's just a word, and words are neither good nor bad but can be made that way by the intent you pour into them. Most people here at this school are going to tell you *fuck* really is a bad word, even though when you walk the campus, I'll bet you hear it more frequently than *hello*. But the same people who'll tell you *fuck* is a bad word won't ever tell you that words like *stupid*, *ugly*, *fat*, *illegal alien*, and so on can inflict much more harm than a little word like *fuck*.

There's no such thing as a bad word. But there are some pretty rotten people out there.

Here are the really bad words in my classroom (and forgive me for saying them aloud—I really never use them at all, which is very confusing to my colleagues who are disciples of the church of Educational Jargon):

- *Common Core*
- *SMART Goals*
- *Smarter Balance* (Please tell me this isn't a margarine brand.)
- *College and Career Readiness* (It's the molded tuna-Jello salad on my school's MISSION STATEMENT.)

Gross.

Tuna and JELLO, like college readiness and career readiness (two completely different skill sets), were never, ever supposed to be served in the same dish.

Look, my beautiful daughter, Chiara, is a senior at the high school where I teach. She is 17. I can't even

begin to tell you how much I do not want my 17-year-old daughter to be made "career ready." Are you kidding me? *Career* implies the rest of her life, and she's got an awful lot of trips around the sun in front of her. I want my 17-year-old daughter to be ready for college (she is); I want her to take no shit from anyone (she does not); I want her to have compassion for all human beings (she definitely does); and I want her to love her life. The career stuff is so far down on the list for me, as it is for her.

So, we have this *thing* at my school—it's called television. They use it to make video announcements to the kids every day. About a week ago, they played a schoolwide 10-minute video from Bill Gates urging high school kids to learn how to code, imploring high school teachers to encourage their students to code, tempting teachers with prizes if they could get their students to do an online coding lesson. At one point in the video, someone—a spokesperson for the wonder of coding—said that his life was magically transformed when he learned how to code, that he felt like a wizard around his friends (I am not making that up).

At that point, I turned the sound off and told my kids this: My life was also magically transformed, and I honestly do feel like a wizard because I know how to read and write a code called the English language. Bill Gates is the last guy you want to have telling you what to do with your future or how to run schools. Because the reason Bill Gates wants high school kids learning how to code is that they cost a hell of a lot less than MIT and Stanford kids who learn how to code.

Kids, go outside and play and get dirty. Then read a book before you go to bed.

There's nothing inherently wrong with wanting to learn how to code, but there's something terribly flawed with a system that does not also encourage or even beg kids to write poetry, which is a sacred thing.

And on the topic of sacred things, Andrew Smith the author wanted to end up by saying a little bit about young adult literature. Well, probably a lot.

I write genre young adult fiction, as opposed to age-level YA. The difference is that I wouldn't claim my books are *for* kids; they're *about* them. Naturally I want kids to read my books, but I also want everyone else who's not a kid to read them, too, because my books, you know, are written in THAT CODE, which

is something intended for all human beings. If I could have one wish, since I'm here in D.C., it would be that somehow someone would get a copy of *Grasshopper Jungle* (2014) into Joe Biden's hands.

I Skyped in to a book club meeting a couple of weeks ago. The book club was called "Bourbon and Books." Located in Philadelphia, it's an all-guy club of seven or eight professional dudes who show up dressed in ties, talk about books, and drink bourbon.

Seriously, this should be a franchise. They asked me to Skype in early so that they'd still know how to turn on their computer. They told me that they'd never read a young adult title before, so they decided to start their exploration of YA by reading *Grasshopper Jungle*.

That was probably a good idea. Right?

I get this from adult readers a lot: the Bourbon and Books guys all told me they wished that books like *Grasshopper Jungle* would have been out there when they were teenagers, because they each found themselves somewhere in that story about Austin and Robby and Shann. And they also all wanted to talk about the undercurrent of sexuality in *Grasshopper Jungle*, too.

I told them this: If I'm going to write stories about young adults, in particular adolescent males, my characters can never be honest or real if there isn't that constantly disturbing ripple of sexuality running through them. Because, let's face it, from about the age of 13 on, guys are pretty messed up by that unstoppable force, and it's almost impossible to reckon with when you're a teenager.

And speaking of impossible to deal with, I want to add a final word—something I said in my *Horn Book Award* acceptance speech—about Andrew Smith the meltdown artist. In the novel *Slapstick or Lonesome No More!* (1976), Kurt Vonnegut quotes the American author Renata Adler as having said that a writer is someone who hates writing.

Let me tell you how strongly I empathize with that statement.

I'm sure my close friends, and especially Michael Bourret, my agent, and Julie Strauss-Gabel and David Gale, my editors, know all too well from experience that from time to time, I have a propensity to melt down about this thing I can't stop doing even when it feels like I'm tearing chunks of stuffing from my soul. I think all of us who write feel the same way on occasion. At least, I sure hope so. I wouldn't want to be the only one, after all.

So Vonnegut wrote about a note he'd received from his agent after Vonnegut's own writing-related meltdown. The note said this: "Dear Kurt—I never knew a blacksmith who was in love with his anvil." Vonnegut goes on to say this: "I am a brother to writers everywhere. . . . It is lucky, too, for human beings need all the relatives they can get—as possible donors or receivers not necessarily of love, but of common decency."

There are lots of us anvil pounders here at this event, many of whom are my closest and truest friends. To you all, I say this: Let's make more writers—not of codes but of the things that are truly sacred.

Andrew Smith is the award-winning author of several young adult novels, including the critically acclaimed Winger and Grasshopper Jungle, which received the 2014 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award and the 2015 Michael L. Printz Honor. He is a native-born Californian who spent most of his formative years traveling the world. His university studies focused on political science, journalism, and literature. He has published numerous short stories and articles. The Alex Crow is his ninth novel. He lives in Southern California.

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Painted on the Surface:

The Marbury Lens and Gore in Young Adult Fiction

When I worked as a human rights researcher in Colombia, my favorite city to visit was Medellín. Cupped by the Andes and experiencing mild weather year-round, the city offers poetry nights, packed art exhibits, and nightly promenades along the river. The locals, known as *paisas*, are also infamous for violence. In the 1980s, Medellín was home to the cocaine cartel run by Pablo Escobar, who utilized extreme violence to maintain control of his wealth and influence. Even by human rights standards, the violence was epic.

But to most Colombians, the gore was all too familiar. During the 1940s and 1950s, a civil war between political parties erupted, and both sides made a practice of mutilating cadavers. Escobar and the paramilitary army he helped assemble adopted similar techniques. In *More Terrible than Death* (2004), my book about Colombia and human rights, I explain that these tactics were meant not only to frighten but to speak. Gore became a macabre language, with body parts serving as words, sentences, paragraphs, and punctuation:

Cuts were elaborate, even artistic. There was the Colombian necktie (*corte de corbata*), when the killer cut a deep groove under the jaw line of the victim and pulled the tongue muscle down and through it, so that it lay like a necktie on the chest. In the flannel cut (*corte de franela*), the killer severed the muscles that keep the head forward, thus allowing the head to fall backward over the spine at a ninety-degree angle, like a sailor's square collar. In the flower vase cut (*corte de florero*), the killer dismembered the victim and inserted the head and limbs into the trunk or the neck of the body, arranged like flowers in a vase. The

monkey cut (*corte de mico*) took its name from a killer who decapitated the pet monkey of a victim and left the head in the man's lap. . . . Occasionally, the killers would leave bodies arranged in a *mise-en-scène*, sitting as if waiting for the next truck along a road, their heads like overnight bags in their laps. (pp. 26–27)

As I travelled, grieving families would press into my hands graphic photographs conveying these “messages,” convinced that gore would prompt the international outcry they yearned for. I knew better. Gore alone does not arouse compassion or even understanding. To the contrary, gore alone pushes most people away. People don't take an interest in human rights abuses because of gore, but rather through an emotional connection with the human beings who suffer.

This tension over gore is at play in fiction, also. Our culture is awash in gore, from the latest James Bond movie to television shows like *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010–2015) and digital games like *Halo* (343 Industries, 2013). Very little of this gore prompts people to care about the characters—or aliens—who are eaten or blown apart. To the contrary, pure gore can be a powerful turn-off and even boring. Reduced to our limbs and viscera, we all look pretty much the same.

But used to illuminate character and reveal emotion, gore can be an essential writer's tool. This includes gore used in books for young readers. The exploitation of gore is no excuse for serious writers to avoid it in their work, even if they are writing for children and young adults. To demonstrate the skillful use

of gore, I examine a key scene in Andrew Smith's *The Marbury Lens* (2010). In it, Smith uses gore to create compelling characters, convincing relationships, and a strong emotional connection to readers. For Smith, gore marks the deep brokenness of the central character, Jack, and helps spur him to take action to save his friends. Gore is literally "painted on the surface" as a way of inviting readers into a deeper emotional landscape. The alternate world of Marbury and its epic violence force Jack to accept his shattered emotional state and serve as a powerful metaphor for what it means to survive violence. Gore is ubiquitous and vile in Marbury; yet, the story never strays from the deep work of character and emotion. Even the most repellent passages feel sure and revealing because of Smith's deliberate technique.

Gore

As any reader of fairy tales knows, people have delighted in gory stories for centuries, well before the Brothers Grimm first set pen to paper. The collection these German academics created in the early 19th century is a starting point for my discussion of gore in literature, including literature written for children. Literary scholar Maria Tatar (2003) notes that the Grimms' stories, which were not meant for children initially, included "murder, mutilation, cannibalism, infanticide, and incest," among other horrors (p. 3). To be sure, the tales were systematically "cleansed" of gore as they were refashioned for children—a trend now in reversal with adaptations like Disney's *Maleficent* (Jolie & Stromberg, 2014) and numerous "fractured" fairy tales.

However, the point remains valuable. What fairy tales lack is complex character, which would make the violence more meaningful and interesting. "There is no psychology in a fairy tale," writes Philip Pullman (2012) in the introduction to his English version of the classic tales. "The tremors and mysteries of human awareness, the whispers of memory, the promptings of half-understood regret or doubt or desire that are so much a part of the subject matter of the modern novel are absent entirely" (p. xiii). While Pullman believes that the Grimms' gore goes beyond "Grand Guignol" (inspired by a 19th-century Parisian theater, the term "Grand Guignol" has come to mean the performance of extreme gore for mainly shock value), characters in these tales "are flat, not round. Only one side is vis-

ible to the audience, but that is the only side we need" (p. xiv).

Certainly, gore is not required for every manuscript. Outside the context of fairy tale, explicit gore is inappropriate for very young children (though explicit grossness remains a reliable crowd-pleaser). For some adults, gore is a taste they prefer not to acquire. In today's media-saturated world, gore pulsates, quivers, gels, pools, smears, drips, clots, spews, splatters, and coagulates in news, video games, movies, and television. Psychologists, criminal justice scholars, and policy makers agree that violent images in media have skyrocketed, with complex effects on people, including children (Gentile & Anderson, 2013, p. 225).

Children can also become numb to violence through media exposure and perceive it as a normal part of life even when they themselves are protected from actual violence. As scholars Judith Franzak and Elizabeth Noll (2006) point out, "The ubiquitous presence of violence is so much a part of our consciousness that for many of us it has a numbing effect. We are at a loss as to how to make meaning of the violent context of our social reality" (p. 662).

Rightly, people are concerned about how images of graphic violence are delivered to children. As Thomas Kullman (2010) asks in his collection of essays, *Violence in English Children's and Young Adults' Fiction*:

Are violent acts, as depicted in fiction, frightening or enjoyable? Do they traumatize young readers or do they help them to come to terms with the violent world around them? Do they contribute to educating young people not to be violent or to prevent violence in their social environment? Or do they render violence acceptable, making readers wish to engage in violent acts themselves, perhaps even advising them as to the best ways of using violence against adversaries? (p. 1)

One particularly sensitive issue is how gore is deployed in relation to the weak or vulnerable. As Tatar (1993) points out, "It is harder to get the cultural joke when the targets of violence are those already disempowered and victimized in real life" (p. 166). Tatar distinguishes "festive violence"—when the powerful or venal get their comeuppance, reasserting conventional morality—from violence against characters who can't fight back or prevail. "Most people will probably laugh when Punch hangs the hangman, but they will not feel entirely at ease when he bludgeons his wife and tosses the baby into the audience" (pp. 168–169).

The use of gore risks implicitly sanctioning or promoting violence against traditional targets: the weak, the different, females. In the gaming world, education professor Eugene Provenzo (1991) points out that violence has “the potential to amplify certain values (for example, women as victims; women as being dependent rather than independent). In doing so, the games reflect a larger cultural hegemony that functions on multiple levels” (p. 116).

For these and other reasons, some criticize what they describe as the overuse of gore in material for children. Kathleen T. Isaacs (2003), a middle school teacher, calls the increase in violence in children’s literature “troubling,” asking, “Do we need to know all the gory details?” For mother and writer Megan Cox Gurdon (2011), Smith’s *The Marbury Lens* is an example of how gore defines a large segment of young adult literature. Like Isaacs, Gurdon argues that the book exploits violence and gore:

So it may be that the book industry’s ever-more-appalling offerings for adolescent readers spring from a desperate desire to keep books relevant for the young. Still, everyone does not share the same objectives. The book business exists to sell books; parents exist to rear children, and oughtn’t be daunted by cries of censorship. No family is obliged to acquiesce when publishers use the vehicle of fundamental free-expression principles to try to bulldoze coarseness or misery into their children’s lives.

Certainly, gore is exploited for shock and sale value. Perhaps the urtext deploying gore in contemporary American literature is Stephen King’s *Carrie* (2011). Though this is not considered a work of young adult literature, that’s mainly because the book was published prior to the emergence of this category as a marketing tool. In important ways, the narrative is close to the young adult category now, since its protagonist is a teen, it takes place in high school, and it is deeply interested in how adolescents struggle with identity issues.

Gore marks the title character from the moment she is introduced in a school bathroom. Anyone who reads horror, watches *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010–2015), or plays games like *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2013) is familiar with the performative use of gore, well within the Grand Guignol tradition. In these creations, gore is meant to entertain and amaze, not evoke pity—or any other human emotion beyond appreciation for macabre artistry.

As an alternate example, writers who have set their stories in the Holocaust grapple with how the very real and devastating settings of concentration and death camps can be incorporated in ways that engage but do not push away readers, including children. Ursula Sherman (1988) worked as a researcher and translator at the Nuremberg trials before becoming a scholar of children’s literature. She opposes any work of fiction meant for children that includes graphic material on the camps, arguing that no novel on this subject matter can accurately portray what they were. “Nothing is gained by substituting an invention for the truth” (p. 182).

However, to categorically dismiss the use of any gore in this or other circumstances or ignore its emotional potential is a mistake. Certainly, pointless gore can numb. But careful gore can contribute to emotional impact, creating the opposite effect—a heightened sense of fear or loss when a character suffers. Contrary to Sherman’s assertion, novels set during the Holocaust have been successfully—often wrenchingly—written. An example from young adult literature must include *The Book Thief* (2007) by Markus Zusak. Zusak’s unconventional and deeply moving story is told by Death, who follows the orphaned book thief, Liesel, as she finds a home and tries to save a Jew in Nazi Germany. *The Book Thief* is a remarkably restrained novel for its subject matter, yet gore is one element Zusak uses to great effect.

In the book’s opening pages, Liesel stands with her mother as two gravediggers attempt to crack open a hole for her dead brother in a frozen wasteland beside a stopped train. Once the deed is done, everyone but Liesel leaves. Kneeling, she attempts to dig through the snow to rescue him. Zusak’s prose is spare and uses body parts—scars, blood, skin, the heart—to masterful, wrenching effect:

Within seconds, snow was carved into her skin.
Frozen blood was cracked across her hands.
Somewhere in all the snow, she could see her broken heart, in two pieces. Each half was glowing, and beating under all that white. She realized her mother had come back for her only when she felt the boniness of a hand on her shoulder. She was being dragged away. A warm scream filled her throat. (pp. 23–24)

While it’s true that few consumers of children’s literature inhabit war zones or become involved with murder for hire, many do live within or close to

violence, whether it is in homes, schools, or neighborhoods. Perhaps we don't want to recognize this, but many children live with gore as an everyday part of their lives through street violence, domestic abuse, or out-of-control bullying, including that administered by their own families. Unlike Isaacs, fellow teacher S. Miller (2005) teaches young adult books that include violence and gore, among them *Shattering Glass* (2003), Gail Giles's *Carrie*-esque story about a high school clique's persecution of a nerdy boy. In that story, instead of isolating the fat and awkward Simon Glass, the clique follows the lead of a new alpha male student who tries to "remake" Glass into a popular kid. The results are not only tragic but gory, as the violence of bullying takes shape in a murderous attack.

Miller's students come from predominately urban, Hispanic, and poor neighborhoods in Santa Fe, New Mexico. When asked why they enjoyed reading about or playing with violence, students were eager to answer:

One young woman suggested that young adults gravitate toward violence "because they are desensitized to it and because it surrounds their lives." Another student suggested "violence is inescapable, trendy, and is sold to youth through video games, films, books, TV, and magazines." When asked how violence surrounds their lives, collectively they noted that they are observer-learners, desensitized by the media, consumers of the war and news, subjected to constant bullying in schools, exposed to pejorative dialogue and gossip, and witnesses to tagged bathroom walls and hallways. . . . A student suggested that in viewing violence, "It can become a projection of inner feelings of anger that we cannot act on and because of that, we vicariously experience the lives of others and act out our inner darkness." Another student concluded that because youth are susceptible and malleable to violence in all of its aspects, they are vulnerable to being subsumed by violence altogether. (p. 90)

For these students, lived and virtual experience exist simultaneously and permeably, as the hallway and virtual bullying mesh, and the ever-present armed policeman in the halls reminds students of the armed killers in places like Sandy Hook or in virtual settings like Liberty City in "Grand Theft Auto IV." Particularly in the United States, violence is a part of our culture. Like any element of "real life," it inevitably makes its way into the stories we tell ourselves.

Like any other tool, gore can be used well or poorly, indiscriminately or to help create just the kind of nuance and depth that fairy tales lack. Parents and

teachers are rightly concerned about pointless gore; however, a thoughtful use of gore can speak to our shared vulnerability and humanity, taking the "flat" characters of fairy tales into the multidimensional world of great stories. Bodies are sectioned metaphorically on the page as a way to evoke how we all feel broken by life. Zusak's Liesel literally sees her broken heart as it stubbornly beats, an apt metaphor for how human beings feel emotional pain. The question should not be, "Is gore used?"—thus introducing coarseness and misery. Rather, we should ask, "How is gore used?"—to merely titillate and shock, or to mount an effective, fresh, and meaningful exploration of the human condition?

Painted on the Surface: *The Marbury Lens*

The Marbury Lens (2010) begins with a boy who tells us that in other places, "boys like me usually ended up twisting and kicking in the empty air beneath gallows. It's no wonder I became a monster, too" (p. 3). Something is very wrong in this world. Smith uses gore to convey that wrongness.

In an email exchange with me, Smith said he began writing the book with this image of a hanged boy. "I knew that my initial object was to tell a story about a victim who becomes a monster of sorts" (A. Smith, personal communication, February 18, 2013). Smith immediately gives us a visual map of the contrast between Jack, his protagonist, and what other, normal boys experience. Other boys mark defining moments by happy, traditionally masculine things: sports, cars, fishing. But what marks Jack is horror and gore, evoking powerlessness, not a traditionally masculine position.

As we learn, Jack feels powerless. At 16, "I got kidnapped." That central event mirrors the writer's own childhood, when he was kidnapped by a stranger:

When I was a kid, I was kidnapped by a complete stranger (much like Jack's story). The event is something that I still think about every day. I never wanted to make my mother or anyone else in my family feel bad about it, like it was their fault or something. But at this point in my life, everyone is either dead or very distantly removed from me, so I decided it was time to write a story about a kidnapping and the way it ripples through this kid's life afterward. While I was writing the novel, I started having these dreams about a place called Marbury, and I saw people I knew there who were monsters in this place. I thought it was a cool dream,

and I thought it needed to be part of this novel. (A. Smith, personal communication, February 18, 2013)

In the novel, Smith moves immediately to the fantastical land of Marbury. When the Earth comes apart, “[T]here’s Marbury, a place that’s kind of like here, except none of the horrible things in Marbury are invisible. They’re painted right there on the surface where you can plainly see them” (p. 3).

While life in the real world seems normal, life in Marbury is dominated by gore and a desperate war between humans and Hunters, who kill and eat boys like Jack. Smith declines to say if Marbury is meant to be real or only exists in Jack’s mind. What is clear is that Marbury expresses Jack’s broken self. Early in the book, we learn that after leaving a friend’s party, Jack is picked up by Freddie Horvath, a stranger who drugs, imprisons, and tortures him. Before Freddie can kill him—as Jack believes he has killed other boys—Jack manages to escape.

At that point, the experience is “painted right there” on his body, though no one in the real world can see it. He has become a boy who can be snatched and almost killed. In the opening lines, Smith sets up a powerful framework for how gore functions in *The Marbury Lens*. While Jack is broken in both worlds, his brokenness is invisible—though no less real—in our world. In Marbury, however, the brokenness is graphically present. Gore is the pain and fear that cannot be wished or counseled away, especially in a boy who never shows his emotions (p. 30).

We learn that Freddie’s violence is not the first Jack has experienced. He never knew his father and was abandoned by his mother. He has doting grandparents who give him everything he needs. Yet he has no emotional connection to them. The only person he really loves is his best friend, Conner. Jack never tells his grandparents about Freddie for fear they will cancel his planned trip to England. But his friend Connor wants revenge, especially since it is clear Jack is not Horvath’s first kidnap victim. An act of violence, Connor promises, will erase the fear Jack feels (p. 43). However, their plan to turn Freddie into the police goes awry, and the kidnapper dies. As Jack leaves for England, as planned, he feels himself coming apart (p. 53).

Perhaps the most vivid use of gore to describe Jack’s brokenness comes with our first entry into Marbury. Jack enters through a pair of purple glasses he receives from a mysterious stranger. As he casually

examines the glasses, everything changes. Without warning, he is thrust into the post-apocalyptic devastation of Marbury (p. 74).

Gore marks the chasm between them. It also reveals Jack’s true brokenness. A bug Jack glimpsed through the lens is now very real, crawling “out of a red-black hole the size of a soft rotten plum” (p. 75).

As more bugs appear and chew the hole, Jack realizes what the hole is: the eye socket of a human skull. “Nothing more of the body was there; just the head. And it was nailed to the wall in front of me, held there as though in conversation, just at my eye level,

by a thick wooden stake that had been driven into the masonry through the other eyeball” (p. 75).

Here, gore is as performative and laden with meaning as a Colombian *corte de florero*. A skull doesn’t naturally get staked to a wall. Jack reacts viscerally, “vomit rising from [his] gut.” That is more of a reaction than Jack had to his own kidnapping and near-rape and death. Confronted with gore, he allows himself to experience deep emotion and to be horrified. For Smith, gore allows Jack, a broken boy, to feel (p. 75).

Then the horror reaches out to him in the form of bugs. When they crawl across his hand, he really examines the cave. He knows the dead man: the person who gave him the purple glasses. In Smith’s Marbury, gore forces the protagonist to actually examine his world. For the first time in the book, Jack experiences more than numbness or unfocused anger (p. 76).

Smith ends the scene with another boy, a stranger, forcing Jack to recognize the danger they are in. Again, the scene is concerned first and foremost with getting Jack to see the truth of the world around him. Somehow, Jack knows the boy’s name, Ben Miller. As arrows fly through the air, Jack sees that the wall “was covered with impaled heads and other dripping, black-rot body parts: hands, hearts, feet, ears, penises.” His inner voice, used throughout the book in italics, whispers at him: “Welcome home, Jack” (p. 76).

The gore-cave is his emotional home, that of a boy sundered by two acts of extreme violence: his own kidnapping and the revenge murder he helped

In Smith’s Marbury, gore forces the protagonist to actually examine his world.

commit. Although in the real world, Jack runs from his feelings of terror and revulsion, in Marbury he cannot escape them. Those feelings are incarnate and drag him through the purple lens, crawl on him, and hunt him with ravenous determination, oblivious to his attempt at numbness.

This scene also propels Jack into action. He cannot run from the gore and hope to elude it as he ran from Freddy and escaped. He must do something to save himself from the arrows whizzing over his and Ben Miller's heads. Gore reaches out for Jack in the form of the black-feathered arrow that pierces his torso. As he watches himself bleed, he relates the pain to what he felt when Freddie tortured him with a stun gun. The pain is linked, though magnified in Marbury "a thousand times and more" (p. 77). Waking up in Marbury after he is pierced by the arrow, Jack feels the excruciating pain he hides from himself in London:

The smell of puke in my face made me want to throw up again, but I held it back. My stomach convulsed, tearing my insides. I traced my hand down my chest toward my hip. It was wet and sticky and I remembered that black arrow, but now it was gone. My fingertip tracked across the bumps of haphazard knots where someone has sewn my body shut with what felt like shoelace, the wound puckered out like pouting lips, swollen and stitched shut with a winding of tawny thread. (pp. 91–92)

Jack must accept the truth of Marbury's violence and work to survive and overcome it (p. 142). Jack also has to confront the damage he sustained—and wrought—with Freddie. In both worlds, Jack must learn to be his broken self with his family and friends, who also appear in Marbury, sometimes as adversaries. "Our connections in this world connect us to Marbury," the stranger who gave him the purple glasses tells him (p. 142). We are all broken and maimed and all must see each other as we are—people who have been wounded and survive only because of one another.

When asked about his epic use of gore, Smith says that nothing is "gratuitous . . . nothing is thrown in there just for the sake of shock or pushing any kind of imaginary envelope or testing the limits of what's acceptable" (Levy, 2012). Gore is a means to a descriptive end, to chart how deeply Jack has been broken and challenge him to search for a way to accept the brokenness in himself and others and find a way to live with and through it.

Marbury, as the location of gore, is like the real world inside out, where the psychological wounds Jack sustained at the hands of Freddie—and as one of Freddie's executioners—become vivid extrusions of flesh, bone, and blood. Marbury also embodies the end of childhood, when the young must confront the deceptions and violence of the adult world, experienced without the protection of parents or other caregivers. As Smith wrote to me about this scene, "When I was a kid, I went through the experience of the death of my father, and then within two years my brother (whom I was with when he died). I didn't really sense a greater sense of cruelty from the universe in either event" (A. Smith, personal communication, February 18, 2013).

In the climax of *The Marbury Lens*, Jack is able to put Marbury into the context of his life and the kidnapping he suffered. In Jack's words:

So the Marbury lens is a kind of prism, an elevator car maybe, that separates the layers and lets me see the Jack who's in the next hole made by the arrow. And that hole is Marbury. The one sure thing about Marbury is that it's a horrible place. But so is right here, too. And there's a certain benefit in the obviousness of its brutality, because in Marbury there's no doubt about the nature of things: good and evil, or guilt or innocence, for example. Not like here, where you could be sitting in the park next to a doctor or someone and not have any idea what a sick and dangerous sonofabitch he really is. Because we always expect things to be so nice and proper, even if we haven't learned our fucking lesson that it just doesn't work out like that all the time. (p. 282)

In a 2010 interview at the Manga Maniac blog (MacNish, 2011), Smith acknowledges that gore can thrill like the most terrifying roller coaster. "But that doesn't sustain interest," he notes.

A lot of young people read because they're looking for books with stories and characters they can feel a connection to. The sad truth is that many of us have had some really bad things happen in our lives. Sometimes, the trauma of those negative experiences diminishes over time, but you still never totally get over it. For a lot of us, there really is no "happily ever after." That's just how life is. When the only thing readers get are books with happy endings, in which all problems are perfectly solved, with plenty of "rising above" and "triumph" for the protagonists, it has a consequence of making some kids feel that there must be something wrong with them—that they're to blame for not having everything work out beautifully in their lives.

In his interview with me, Smith noted that some adults may find aspects of the adolescent experience honestly presented to be “too challenging” to handle (A. Smith, personal communication, February 18, 2013). I think Smith touches on something profound and also contradictory about young adults. Adults tend to romanticize those years and forget about how deeply challenging they are for anyone actually living them. At the same time, children experience the metaphorical and too-often actual horrors of growing up without any perspective, thus making events like bullying (*Carrie* and *Shattering Glass*) or crimes (*The Marbury Lens*) otherworldly, out of control, and literally life threatening.

Conclusion

In 2008, I sat beside my father as he drowned in his recliner, a victim of the slow and inexorable hardening of the lungs caused by pulmonary fibrosis. Three months later, my husband of 27 years announced, without preamble, that he was leaving, putting my home, our children, and my career in jeopardy. Two months later, I had to put an elderly cat to sleep. A month later, the elderly dog lay on my back patio for the last time as the vet, indescribably kind, injected the drug that would stop her heart.

It was my *annus horribilis*, to quote Elizabeth II.

For months, I worked, shopped, ate, and slept with my torso split and flayed, blood and entrails spattering behind me and soaking whatever cushion I sat on. At least, that was how I felt. No one could see the gore, though it seemed as real to me as my own hands and feet. For the first time, I saw the image depicting the sacred heart of Jesus not as metaphorical but actual, the result of his apostles’ betrayal and his own father’s decision to force him to feel the pain of crucifixion and death. Of course, that left him cracked open, his beating heart exposed, his innermost tissues aflame.

In other words, I felt a lot like Liesel digging madly at her brother’s grave. I also felt like Jack in Marbury, when damage comes vividly to life in the fantastical world reached through the purple glasses. Always a fan of horror and gore, I saw these descriptive elements in a new light, as a way to make real and visceral the emotions we all feel when we are hurt, abandoned, or mistreated.

As a teacher, I’ve learned to pause at these moments in the text and help students examine even a few lines that contain gore. Too often, they skim over language similar to what I’ve selected for this article, feeling the impact of the words but failing to understand why they are moved. As a teaching tool, the pause to ask what is really happening in this line or paragraph and examining how it makes our feelings change is critical.

Also, I think a frank discussion of the role of gore in our super-saturated media culture is an essential part of teaching any literature, including the works cited here. Why do the thousand deaths in the latest thriller leave us cold, while the relatively subdued loss of Augustus Waters (in John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars*, 2012) move tens of thousands of readers to bookstores? One reason is because we are made to care. We see the characters as human, flawed, suffering, and vulnerable—qualities that aren’t highly valued by our culture. The vulnerability of the wounded, of the scarred, of the hurting, is a part of that.

Finally, I think that teachers can use their own personal experience with pain and loss—as I have in this piece—to connect with students and show them that these feelings are not only common, but shared. To be sure, teachers must limit any personal information to what is appropriate for the age and level of the students they are teaching as well as the comfort level of the teacher. But such sharing can enrich the teaching moment and draw out students who may feel profoundly alone and isolated by their own experiences of pain. Literature must be more than an intellectual exercise. Even great literature fails when it falls short of reaching us as individuals who can sympathize or empathize with the pain of others, either the people beside us in the classroom or the characters we come to love and grieve for on the page.

As adults, we don’t want to admit that children will experience violence and gore. But they do, often in surprising ways. I never pelted tampons at an ox of a girl bleeding in a gym shower, but through King’s muscular prose, I am able to connect with Carrie’s dumbness and shame while also feeling the struggle within the other girls, both elated by their violence and shamed by it. I’ve been Carrie, and I’ve been those girls, to my horror. I also feel powerfully Jack’s brokenness as he tries to understand the violence done to him and the violence he is capable of.

In a way, we all come from that place and return to it, patiently or not. Gore covers us as we enter the world and sometimes as we exit. When we think we are at our most elegant, protected, and powerful, gore coats us and splatters on the floor. Gore trips us when we want to be accepted. Gore leaves a bloody handprint on our clothes when we think we are doing good. Gore is our humanity, part of what makes us so inescapably human. Writers like Smith deploy gore to reveal what is deep and true about their characters. For all of us, how we handle the inevitable, inconvenient, and messy eruptions of the blood and guts in our lives is the real test of our humanity.

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“A Very Likable Person”:

Character Development in Louis Sachar’s *There’s a Boy in the Girls’ Bathroom*

Many students assume that while writing is difficult for them, good writers write easily, quickly, and almost perfectly the first time. Students label themselves as poor writers because the process is hard, and some give up or never realize their potential. Teachers can tell students that writing is difficult for most writers, but students often remain unconvinced. If these students could see that their favorite authors struggle through producing novels, they just might reconsider their definitions of good writers and be motivated to write themselves.

Louis Sachar’s novels appeal to many readers and writers. The Wayside School series, the Marvin Redpost series, and novels such as *There’s a Boy in the Girls’ Bathroom* and *Holes* are well known and loved by children and adults:

The situations he puts his characters in are so everyday that adults can remember being there. Children who read his books have either been through similar situations, hoped they would never go through anything like it, or have witnessed someone else living through it. His work crosses the boundaries of age and is enjoyed by young and old alike. (Sachar & Sachar, 1999, p. 421)

For his writing, Sachar has received many book awards, including the 1999 Newbery Medal for *Holes*. He has only achieved such accolades by committing time and effort to his writing, as he explains during his Newbery Medal acceptance speech:

Usually I spend up to a month brainstorming. I’ll get an idea, write a few words on my computer, think, “That’s stupid!” and delete it. I’ll try something else—“That’s dumb!”—and try again. Sometimes I may get an idea that intrigues me, and

I may work on it for a week before realizing it isn’t going anywhere. Then at some point I’ll get an idea that may not seem very special at first; however, as I write, it immediately starts to grow. One idea leads to another idea, and that idea leads to another idea, and that idea leads to another idea, until I have a story going. (Sachar, 1999, p. 414)

Sachar’s process includes many rewrites. In an interview for *Stamford*, Sachar stresses the importance of revision: “The first draft is always the most painful. My firsts are very poorly written; they contain a lot of garbage. But I have an idea in my mind of what I want it to be, so I go back and do another draft. I start tearing it all apart. Revision is not just correcting spelling and grammar. That will make the story only a little better” (Davis, 2002, p. 29). As a prolific, honored, and favorite author who makes transparent his own struggles to produce good writing, Sachar is a clear model for student writers who struggle to write.

The Kerlan Collection

As a graduate student at the University of Minnesota with access to the Kerlan Collection, I had the opportunity to closely examine Louis Sachar’s writing process. The Kerlan Collection, “one of the world’s great children’s literature research collections” (University of Minnesota Libraries, 2010), houses books as well as manuscripts, illustrations, and other original materials by authors and illustrators of children’s literature. The Collection is available to anyone who wishes to access the materials, but most of the materials must stay in the reading room at the Andersen Library on the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus. Fortunately,

teachers do have online access to a few lesson plans utilizing materials from the Kerlan Collection, as well as other titles and artifacts contained in the full Children's Literature Research Collection (<https://www.lib.umn.edu/clrc/resources-for-teachers>). Additionally,

The Kerlan Collection . . . houses books as well as manuscripts, illustrations, and other original materials by authors and illustrators of children's literature.

as a result of working through the materials that Louis Sachar donated, I have generated and include my own suggestions for teaching at later points in this article.

Sachar's donations to the Kerlan Collection include 160 folders of typescripts, front matter, galley proofs, corrected page proofs, notes, correspondence, etc. from nine of his books (Eyer, 2008).

Of the nine books, I found a wealth of information, including multiple drafts of the novel and correspondence between Sachar and his editors, for *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*. I include a description of my process for working through Sachar's materials on *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*, a discussion of my findings related to Sachar's development of his character Bradley throughout his drafts of the novel, and teaching ideas I developed that utilize this information.

My Process

What intrigued me most about *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom* was the protagonist, Bradley Chalkers, which is not surprising since I connect most to literature when I relate to or react strongly to the characters. At the beginning of the novel, Bradley's only friends are the toy animals he plays with and talks to in his bedroom. He has difficulty making friends with his peers because he comes across as very belligerent. As the novel progresses, Bradley meets and begins to work with the new school counselor, Carla, who helps him open up to others, allowing him to make friends with other fifth graders in his class. My question as I finished the novel was: *How did Louis Sachar create a character that seems so unlovable in the beginning but becomes so sympathetic by the end?* At this point, I

knew that character development would be my focus as I delved into the folders in the Kerlan Collection.

The Folders

Sachar's notes, drafts, and correspondence fill three boxes in the Kerlan Collection. Unfortunately, the items are not arranged in any particular order (the Kerlan Collection, like many archives, chooses to preserve the order of materials in which they were donated). Not only are the drafts out of order, pages are misplaced within drafts, and some pages (even chapters) are missing from various drafts. Therefore, my first order of business in tackling this project was to try to organize the folders. I wanted to be able to look across drafts to see if/how Bradley changed/developed from the first draft to the last draft, so putting the drafts in order seemed important.

I decided to start with the first folder of the first box (MF 2717), keeping notes related to the organization (where I thought the pages and drafts belonged and what I thought was missing from the drafts). Unfortunately, the pages of the drafts in the first eight folders are neither titled nor numbered, and I spent a frustrating amount of time trying to figure out their order by referencing the novel. Thankfully, throughout this process, the librarians and staff at the Andersen Library kept the boxes out for me in the reading room so that I would have access to them whenever I had a chance to work there. To avoid giving up on the project, I moved to the last box (MF 2719), which contains three almost complete drafts with page numbers. Given the slight differences between two of the drafts and the novel, I was able to ascertain that these had to be later drafts. However, relying on the correspondence in addition to the novel expedited the process.

Most helpful in organizing the drafts was the correspondence between Sachar and various editors, dating from July 2, 1982 to June 24, 1986 (MF 2719, Folder 46). Sachar first sent the manuscript to Avon, where it was rejected. He then sent the manuscript to Western Publishing Company. The editor told Sachar she would be willing to look at it again if he rewrote it, and she accepted the rewrite. However, Western "decided to cancel the preteen fiction line for which *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom* was slated" (MF 2719, Folder 46), so Sachar had to find another publisher. He rewrote the novel again and hired an agent who sent the manuscript to Alfred A. Knopf and

Pantheon (Knopf), where it was eventually accepted and published. Students who balk at rewriting a paper might benefit from knowing that Sachar worked on this novel for over five years and completely rewrote the novel at least twice! The correspondence helped me distinguish earlier drafts from later drafts, assisting me in my purpose of focusing on Sachar's process of developing Bradley as a character.

The Focus

In the process of going back and forth between the correspondence and the drafts for purposes of organization, I noticed that one of the most common suggestions the editors made in the letters regarding Sachar's early manuscripts was that he needed to decide whose story he was telling (MF 2719, Folder 46). And in fact, in the early manuscripts, the story switches its focus between Bradley, Jeff (another student), Carla (the school counselor), Colleen (another student), and Lori (another student). However, the later drafts become less about Jeff, Carla, Colleen, and Lori, and more about Bradley. At this point, I became interested in the idea that Bradley becoming the focus of the novel probably related to the development of Bradley's character in the novel. My notes shifted from a focus on which drafts came first and what was missing from the drafts to how the drafts differed from the novel in terms of the focus on Bradley.

As I moved back and forth between the novel and the drafts, I quickly became overwhelmed by the amount of information available and realized I would need to narrow my focus even further. Since I was interested in Bradley's development throughout the novel, I did not want to limit myself to one chapter or event. As a character, Bradley was most real to me in his exchanges with others (Jeff, the other students at school, Carla, his stuffed animals). Of the other characters, I was most interested in Carla, both because of her role in Bradley's transformation and because of the interesting fact that Sachar modeled her after his wife (Children's Book Council, 2006). At this point, then, I narrowed my focus to the sections in the drafts in which Carla and Bradley interact.

Discussion

Many readers find Bradley's character to be "real, worrisome, and funny" (Sebesta, 1988, p. 83). Sachar achieved this positive portrayal through many re-

writes, specifically as they relate to the focus of the novel. In this section, I show how Bradley's creation as a complex, multidimensional, sympathetic, transformed character happens through the changes Sachar makes in narrowing his focus to tell mainly Bradley's story. I first illustrate the changes in the novel on a global level, as Carla's story becomes less important and Bradley's story becomes more important. I then explore how this focus on Bradley's story creates space for Bradley to become a more multidimensional character. Finally, I highlight Bradley's transformation in the novel from seemingly unlovable to sympathetic as a result of Sachar's decision to shift the story's focus to Bradley, drawing out his multidimensionality and encouraging the reader to identify with him.

Whose Story Is This?

As indicated earlier, one of the most common suggestions the editors made in the letters regarding Sachar's early manuscripts was that he needed to decide whose story he was telling (MF 2719, Folder 46). The editor at Avon, the first publishing company that rejected Sachar's manuscript, wrote:

As always, your characters are evocative and moving, and your dialogue is good. But before the novel can come together, you must decide *whose* story it is and what you're trying to say. The novel starts as Jeff's story, then becomes Bradley's, then Carla's, then Lori's, then Colleen's, etc. The point of view shifts continually. . . . I feel that especially in a children's book there should be one kid readers can identify with, one kid's story. It's too much in too little space to try and develop all of these kids' stories, and Carla as well. (correspondence dated July 2, 1982; MF 2719, Folder 46)

While the editor at Avon identified the shifting point of view as a problem, she did not offer a solution. However, the editor at Western Publishing Company, who also rejected the manuscript but offered Sachar a contract to rewrite the story, suggested:

At present the reader doesn't know where to direct his caring and attention. If we are right that it's Bradley's story, then Bradley is the focus and you must keep that in mind as you revise. We have to care about the others too—and we do! But Bradley's the important one. . . . It seems to me that you have to get inside Bradley's mind more, if you can, and that we have to see all that happens largely from his point of view. (correspondence dated August 16, 1982; MF 2719, Folder 46)

The editor at Western Publishing Company wanted Sachar to focus on Bradley, but even after initial revi-

sions, Sachar still, according to his eventual publisher, Alfred A. Knopf and Pantheon, failed to focus his story: “It is disconcerting to be following the situation through so many different eyes, and the frequent shifts keep the focus from being sharp enough and keep the reader from establishing a strong link with Bradley” (correspondence dated September 24, 1984; MF 2719, Folder 46). All three editors desired to see the story from one point of view, and two of the editors suggested that the story should be Bradley’s. In these early drafts, though, Sachar’s story remains unfocused.

This shifting point of view mentioned by the editors can be illustrated using the sections in the manuscript that focus on the exchanges between Bradley and Carla. These exchanges are particularly relevant, as two of the editors comment specifically on Carla’s presence in the novel. Joanna Cotler from Avon Books remarks, “Another major problem for me is Carla. . . . This is a *kids*’ story, not one for—or about—adults. Her story is a major part of the book and I’m not sure why” (correspondence dated July 2, 1982; MF 2719, Folder 46). Likewise, Ellen Rudin from Western Publishing Company states:

[Carla] is a special problem in that you have let her take center stage, literally, in a story that isn’t really hers. I’m not sure how you would fix this, but I think the reader must see much less of her. . . . In short, although Carla is extremely important to Bradley (and I think to you, too, Louis), she is not all that important to the reader and you need to rethink the size of her role in what actually takes place in the span of the story. (correspondence dated August 16, 1982; MF 2719, Folder 46)

Teaching Idea: Whose Story Is This?

Show students the editors’ comments to Sachar as well as one of his early drafts (e.g., see “Carla Leaving” in Appendix A). Read the version of Chapter 40 in the published book and explore Sachar’s revision process as he focuses the novel on one character, Bradley. What is Bradley like in each version? How does he change from the draft to the published novel? Encourage student writers to visit a piece of their own and consider revising to focus on one character, as well.

Neither of the editors suggests removing Carla from the story, but they both indicate that her presence detracts from what the story could be for its readers. By examining the exchanges between Bradley and Carla from earlier drafts about the shifting point of view, to later drafts with a more focused point of view, it becomes apparent that, as the story becomes less about Carla, the focus shifts to Bradley and his story.

In the early drafts of the novel, the interactions between Bradley and Carla suggest their stories are of equal import. Sachar allows the reader into Bradley’s and Carla’s thoughts, forcing the reader to vacillate between two points of view. For instance, in Bradley’s first meeting with Carla, the reader experiences Bradley’s perspective of Carla telling him he can break something in her room: “Bradley looked at her suspiciously. He didn’t trust her. He’d break something and get into trouble and then nobody would believe that she said he could. ‘I’m not in the mood,’ he said.” On this same page, the reader then experiences Carla’s perspective of having Bradley lie to her: “Of course, she didn’t believe any of the lies Bradley told her. However, she thought that one of the reasons Bradley lied so much was because nobody believed anything he said anyway. She felt that if she acted like she believed him then he would eventually start telling the truth” (MF 2718, Folder 21).

During a later meeting, Bradley asks Carla, “What’s new with you?” and she responds, “I suppose the most interesting part of my life is you kids.” Then Bradley asks Carla if the other kids are flunking like he is, and she describes a student she sees who does well in school but cannot relax. Sachar offers readers this explanation for her candor: “Normally, Carla would never tell anyone about any of the children she sees. Whatever went on in her office was confidential. However, in this case, she figured it was alright to talk to Bradley about the boy who got all A’s. . . . she thought it would help give Bradley confidence to know that other children had problems, too, even those who got all A’s” (MF 2717, Folder 3). In these exchanges, Sachar includes Carla’s thoughts and reasoning for the reader, encouraging the reader to see both characters’ points of view, but this approach could detract from engaging fully with either one. Also, through Carla’s eyes, the reader sees a psychological diagnosis of Bradley, which might actually detract from the reader connecting to him.

In other places in early drafts of the manuscript, specific details included about Carla give weight to her story's importance. In the section of the novel where Carla tells Bradley she is leaving the school, Bradley screams, "I hate you!" and runs into the boys' bathroom. She follows him, but he tells her to leave. The chapter ends with Carla:

Carla turned and quickly walked out of the bathroom. As she stepped outside a lady teacher walked passed [sic]. The teacher stopped and looked at her peculiarly but Carla just ignored her. She walked back to her office, sat down at the round table and cried for about a half an hour. Then she picked up Bradley's wadded up book report and carefully tried to straighten it out and tape it back together. (MF 2718, Folder 20)

At the end of this chapter in the early drafts of the manuscript, Bradley is not even present. Instead, Sachar focuses on Carla, showing her emotional response to the situation with Bradley and highlighting her actions outside of her exchange with Bradley.

A final example that illustrates the importance of Carla's story in the early drafts of the novel happens in the last chapter. Initially, the novel ends with Carla. In early drafts, Sachar takes the reader to Carla's new school and shows Carla enjoying her job as a substitute teacher (MF 2717, Folder 5). Then, when she gets home, she has a package from Bradley. She opens the package, reads the letter, finds out Bradley is doing well in school, and grins "from ear to ear" (MF 2717, Folder 5). This ending highlights Carla's situation for the reader and gives the final word on Bradley through Carla. With these details included in the early drafts, it is clear that the editors were right. Carla had too much of a role, detracting from Bradley's story when the novel should be about him.

As Sachar revised the novel to highlight Bradley's story, he removed passages that explained Carla's rationale for the ways in which she responded to Bradley. For instance, in later drafts that describe Carla's first meeting with Bradley, the explanation for how Carla reacts to Bradley's lies has been removed (MF 2718, Folder 24). Instead, the focus is on Bradley and how he finds it amazing that Carla believes everything he says. Likewise, when Bradley asks Carla what's new, Sachar removed Carla's comment ("I suppose the most interesting part of my life is you kids," p. 144) from the novel, thereby eliminating the explanation of why she would tell this story to Bradley. Also

in the novel, Bradley and Carla have a brief conversation about a shower curtain (new in Carla's life because she bought one yesterday), and then Bradley tells Carla about being invited to a birthday party. Carla is still important in these exchanges, but only because she is important to Bradley, not in her own right. In these exchanges, Bradley becomes the center of the story instead of just one of the participants.

Sachar also removed details about Carla's life that were unimportant to Bradley's story. In the section of the novel where Carla tells Bradley she is leaving the school, the chapter ends with Bradley instead of with Carla (Sachar, 1987, pp. 160-161). Sachar removed any mention of Carla's reaction to Bradley's unhappiness that she was leaving. Instead, she leaves him in the bathroom, and the chapter ends with, "Bradley stayed in the bathroom until the bell rang, then he went home, sick" (p. 161). Here the reader still knows that Carla cares for Bradley, since she follows him into the bathroom and tries to talk to him, but Bradley is the character that keeps our interest throughout this exchange. Because Carla is less developed as a character, she no longer detracts the reader from identifying with Bradley, and her lack of development allows space for Bradley to be developed further.

Sachar's most noticeable revision is in the last chapter. The conclusion changes drastically from the early drafts, which end with Carla, to the published novel, which concludes with Bradley. In one of the last revisions, the chapter begins with Bradley's letter to Carla, leaving out Carla's experience as a substitute. However, this revision ends with Bradley telling his stuffed animals that they would visit Carla often (MF 2718, Folder 26). This revision focuses the reader on Bradley's experience, but Carla is the last thought, albeit from Bradley's perspective. The chapter in the published novel, however, ends purely with Bradley. In the last two pages of the final version, Bradley puts his letter and stuffed animal into an envelope to mail

Carla is still important in these exchanges, but only because she is important to Bradley . . . Bradley becomes the center of the story instead of just one of the participants.

to Carla. The last paragraph states, “He stared out his window for a moment, then looked back down at the bulge in the envelope. He frowned. But it was an unusual frown. In fact, it might have been a smile” (Sachar, 1987, p. 195). Sachar still shows Carla as a substitute teacher receiving Bradley’s package, but instead of ending with her reaction to Bradley’s letter, the novel ends with the words of Bradley’s letter (MF 2717, Folder 13; MF 2719, Folder 33). Carla may be the focus, but Bradley gets the last word.

As the story became less about Carla, it becomes more about Bradley. The reader stops seeing Bradley through Carla’s eyes; in fact, the reader sees more of Bradley, since Carla takes up less space on the page. These changes not only provided the necessary focus to the story that Sachar’s editors suggested, but they also created a space for Bradley to become a more multidimensional character.

Who Is Bradley?

After reading Sachar’s initial manuscript, Joanna Cotler, editor for Avon Books, commented, “As it now stands, Bradley is the most developed character and he’s quite sympathetic. But why is he so ‘bad’ and troubled? . . . What makes Bradley who he is?” (correspondence dated July 2, 1982; MF 2719, Folder 46). Similarly, Ellen Rudin, editor for Western Publishing Company, suggested, “It seems to me that you have to get inside Bradley’s mind more, if you can, and that we have to see all that happens largely from his point

of view” (correspondence dated August 16, 1982; MF 2719, Folder 46). These two editors identified for Sachar the importance of developing Bradley and opening up the mind of this character to the reader. Sachar achieves this largely through narrowing his focus to Bradley’s story, which allows him to create a more multidimensional Bradley.

As Sachar crafts his story to be less about the other characters and more about Bradley, he has more space on the page to show Bradley to the reader instead of telling the reader about Bradley. In the initial drafts, Sachar judges Bradley as a liar with statements such as, “Bradley found it easier to lie than to tell the truth” (MF 2717, Folder 2) and “He lied out of habit” (MF 2717, Folder 6). However, in the published novel, Bradley lies in specific instances (Sachar, 1987, p. 36) or tells stories (p. 40), but Sachar does not label him a liar. Rather, through the various exchanges with his teachers, his parents, and Carla, Bradley is shown as a troubled young man who sometimes makes things up to protect himself, to make sure people react to him in a certain way so that he can avoid getting close to people and getting hurt.

Sachar also complicates labeling Bradley through his portrayal of Bradley’s reactions to Carla. In two different situations, Sachar’s first drafts include Bradley reacting to Carla by shouting, “I hate you.” At the end of his first visit to Carla’s office, when Carla offers her hand to shake, Bradley shouts at her and runs back to class (MF 2717, Folder 6; MF 2717, Folder 14; MF 2718, Folder 16; MF 2718, Folder 21). This exchange occurs near the beginning of the story and shows Bradley to be predictably belligerent and antagonistic. In the published novel, though, Sachar portrays Bradley somewhat differently. He does not shout, “I hate you,” but still ignores Carla’s outstretched hand. Then, “when [Bradley] got to Mrs. Ebbel’s class, he crumpled his picture into a ball and dropped it in the wastepaper basket next to her desk” (p. 42). This picture was one Carla asked to hang on the wall; Bradley was not used to teachers wanting to hang his work on the wall and refused to let Carla have it. In this final version, Bradley is not so much belligerent and antagonistic as he is scared and self-destructive.

Similarly, when Carla tells Bradley she is leaving the school, he gets upset and runs to the boys’ bathroom. In the initial drafts, Bradley shouts at her

Teaching Idea: Who Is Bradley?

Show students the editors’ comments and an early draft of the beginning of *There’s a Boy in the Girls’ Bathroom* (see Appendix B). Compare this draft to Chapter 1 in the published novel to explore Sachar’s revision attempts at showing the reader who Bradley is, at “getting inside Bradley’s mind.” How much do we know about Bradley with each beginning? How is he portrayed?

Encourage student writers to visit a piece of their own and add details that show their readers who their characters are and why they act the way they do.

to “Go away!” and, when she tries to talk to him, he screams, “I hate you!” (MF 2718, Folder 20). Again, he is portrayed as belligerent and antagonistic. In the novel, instead of yelling at Carla, Bradley responds “coldly” to her efforts to comfort him, even though “he felt like his insides were being ripped apart” (p. 160). Here, Bradley’s response to Carla and the explanation of how he is feeling illustrate the complexity of his pain more clearly than the shouting in the early drafts.

As Bradley becomes more multidimensional, he also becomes more realistic. When Bradley discusses with Carla his recent invitation to a birthday party, he indicates nervousness about attending. In early drafts, his nervousness stems from inexperience, as he has “never been to a birthday party before” (MF 2717, Folder 3; MF 2718, Folder 19; MF 2718, Folder 29). This statement might indicate that Bradley has always been such a horrible person that he never had friends willing to invite him to a birthday party, but that seems unlikely, and Bradley is a more developed character than this explanation would allow. In later drafts and in the novel, Bradley has not been to a recent birthday party: “‘I’ve never been to a birthday party!’ he blubbered, then hiccupped. ‘Not a real one, where other kids are there.’ He hiccupped again, then blew his nose. ‘A long time ago, when I was in third grade I went to one, but then they made me go home because I sat on the cake’” (MF 2719, Folder 44; p. 146). Bradley had, in fact, been invited to birthday parties but, in a memorable instance, exhibited unwelcome behavior, a more likely and realistic explanation for why others would not invite him back. Ultimately, by creating the space for Bradley to be a multidimensional character, Sachar was able to depict a transformed Bradley from the beginning to the end of the novel.

Bradley’s Transformation

At the beginning of *There’s a Boy in the Girls’ Bathroom*, Bradley Chalkers has no friends, and his teacher has given up on him. In class, he sits apart from everyone else and smiles “a strange smile. He stretched his mouth so wide, it was hard to tell whether it was a smile or a frown” (p. 4). He does not do his work, and the teacher pays little attention to him. However, when a new counselor comes to the school, Bradley’s

teacher suggests that Bradley see her, and it is through these visits with Carla that Bradley is transformed.

Initially, Bradley resists Carla’s efforts to help him. He makes rude comments, tells stories, and refuses to shake her hand. If Bradley had been labeled by Sachar and the reader as a liar and antagonist, it would be difficult to see him transformed. However, since he is portrayed as a complex character: “As the story moves along, readers will begin to sympathize with Bradley; they’ll root for him, hoping he’ll exchange his misfit status for reasonable contentment” (*Kirkus Reviews*, 2002). Slowly but surely, Carla convinces Bradley that she believes in him and that he can believe in himself. Bradley decides, “I’m going to be good” (Sachar, 1987, p. 95), though it takes time for others to notice. He begins to look forward to his visits with Carla, and he starts doing his homework. He becomes more friendly to others because “he knew Carla would appreciate it” (p. 128). He even makes friends, and all is well because he has Carla.

Because Sachar’s portrayal of Bradley encourages readers to “establish a strong link with [him]” (Knopf, correspondence dated September 24, 1984; MF 2719, Folder 46), it is a crushing blow to find out with Bradley that Carla is leaving. Bradley quickly reverts to his old ways, but this time with sadness, because life is different after his time with Carla. In this new version of life, he finally receives a gold star from his teacher for the book report he wrote about one of Carla’s favorite books. And he still has friends who want him to feel better. Although it seems that Bradley might give up upon Carla’s leaving, he cannot because he has changed.

Before Carla departs, she leaves a letter apologizing for hurting him, encouraging him to keep doing his work, and telling him, “You’re a very likable person” (p. 172). With this encouragement, Bradley attends the birthday party (and has a wonderful time) and writes to Carla telling her that he is doing well in school. Bradley has, in fact, become a likable person who likes himself. His transformation could only occur because Sachar abandoned the multiple perspectives and focused his novel on Bradley’s perspective, creating a multidimensional Bradley in the process. With this story focused on a complex character, the reader can connect to Bradley and follow him through his process of fitting in after having been a misfit.

Conclusion

Sachar's development of Bradley as the main character in *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom* from the first draft to the published novel illustrates the painful but rewarding process of writing. Knowing that a prolific and honored author such as Louis Sachar struggles through the writing process to complete his works gives students and other aspiring authors hope for their own writing. Sachar's process began before his first manuscript submission in 1982, and the novel was published in 1987. Throughout these years of writing and rewriting and receiving help from his editors, Sachar creates in Bradley his trademark writing, characterized by one reviewer as "a humorous and realistic portrayal and exploration of relationships and feelings; his storylines characteristically chart the efforts of his various characters to discover and then assert their young identities" (Vang, 2005, p. 179).

My understanding of Bradley as conveyed in this article was only possible because of Louis Sachar's generous donation of his materials to the Kerlan Collection, his willingness to grant permission for me to quote from these materials in my paper, and the welcoming support of the librarians and staff at the Andersen Library. It is my hope that as more materials from the Kerlan Collection are made available online, more teachers and their students will benefit from glimpses into their favorite authors' writing processes.

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Appendix A: Carla Leaving

ON Friday, Bradley's father told him that since he didn't have a temperature he had to go to school.

"Hi Bradley," said Robbie. "Where you been?"

Bradley didn't answer him. He just took his seat in the back of the room.

"Hi Bradley," said Jeff. "Were you sick?"

Bradley didn't answer him.

"Look," said Jeff. "You have a gold star next to your name." Bradley took out a pencil and scribbled on his desk. Out of the corner of his eye, Bradley looked at the chart on the wall. Next to his name was a gold star.

"Bradley," called Mrs. Ebbel. "Will you come up here, please?"

He walked up to her desk. "I was sick," he said. "I have a note from my mother. Call her if you don't believe me."

"Oh, I don't care about that," said Mrs. Ebbel. "I just wanted to tell you how much I liked your book report. Miss Davis gave it to me. She explained how she accidentally ripped it but she taped it back together. Did you see, I put a gold star next to your name."

"No, I didn't see it," said Bradley.

"Go look at it," she told him. "Oh, and I'd like to borrow the book from you. I want to read it."

"I don't have it," said Bradley. He walked away from her. "Anyway, it stinks."

Bradley sat back down and looked once again at the gold star next to his name. It seemed to shine. It shined the way Carla seemed to shine, when she smiled at him. He hated her. But still, as he looked at the star, he couldn't help feeling a little proud, no matter how hard he tried not to care.

At lunch and recess he refused to play basketball. He hated all those guys, anyway. ~~XXXXXXXXXX-just-sat-by-himself-~~

"He's still a little sick," Jeff explained to the other guys. "The doctor says he should wait a couple of days before doing any strenuous activity."

Bradley sat by himself. He knew it was Carla's last day and he wanted to see her again, but he wouldn't let himself do that. It felt as if ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ his heart was tied in a knot, and everytime he thought of her, the knot ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ was pulled tighter.

Lori and Melinda walked passed him. "Hi Bradley," they said. He stuck out his tongue at them.

They walked away. "Euuu," said Lori. ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ "Hell ruin Colleen's birthday party."

"Good," said Melinda.

After school Jeff tried talking to Bradley again. "You should go say good-bye to Carla," he said. "Today's her last day, you know. I asked her about you. She said she hoped you'd stop by and talk to her."

"I hate her," said Bradley.

Jeff walked away.

It would have been so easy. She was in her office, hoping he'd stop by. He wanted to go see her. But he walked straight home, instead. And the knot inside him was pulled even tighter.

Appendix B: Beginning of *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*

1. A smile or a frown?

Before he left for school, Bradley hid two objects under his pillow. These were two little animal figures; a red rabbit and a brown and white bear. He patted the pillow, then headed out of his room.

"Where's your homework?" his mother greeted him. She was a large woman with very fat arms and legs.

"I did it yesterday at school," he answered. That was a lie. He hadn't done his homework all year. "Call my teacher if you don't believe me."

His lunch sack was waiting for him on the kitchen counter. He looked inside it, then made a face like he smelled something putrid. "What's this stuff?"

His mother didn't answer him. "If you don't hurry you'll be late," she told him.

"I'm never late," he said. That was a second lie. He was

late for school at least twice a week.

Bradley's father, using a cane to help him walk, stepped into the kitchen. "What are you still doing here?" he said when he saw Bradley.

"I'm going," said Bradley.

"I better drive you," said his father, "so you won't be late."

"No, you can't," said Bradley. "I'm supposed to meet my friends at the corner so we can walk to school together. They're waiting for me."

That was a third lie. Bradley wasn't supposed to meet his friends. The sad truth was that he didn't have any friends.

(Bradley lied several more times before leaving for school, but perhaps it would be better to stop numbering his lies now, before the numbers get too enormous.)

He was in the fifth grade although he was old enough for the sixth grade. He had taken the fourth grade twice. He would have taken the fourth grade a third time, except there were only two fourth grade teachers and neither would have him again.

He walked into Mrs. Ebbel's class, late, and took his seat at the back corner of the room. Last seat, last row. His desk was an island. Nobody sat in the desks next to or in front of him.

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Beyond Borders: A Partnership to Promote Independent Reading

The voices of classroom teachers are often missing in the discourse about best practices in schools. We believe that teachers' voices are essential to bridge the ever-present gap between research and practice. By reading about the efforts and experiences of others, we can build on their successes and hopefully avoid their mistakes, thus improving our own practice. In frequent conversations with Lacey about her efforts to promote independent reading in her school, Karen, her graduate advisor, suggested that Lacey share her experiences with the literacy community. What follows is Lacey's story.

* * * * *

"Can't we just read our own books?" My middle school students begged me in nearly every class period, which, honestly, brought about mixed emotions for me. On one hand, I was elated that my students actually wanted to read. I hoped that meant that I was making some progress toward creating lifelong readers. On the other hand, their pleas left me feeling like I wasn't meeting their needs. Most of my students wouldn't dream of touching a book outside of school, and I knew that if I missed this opportunity to cultivate their motivation, many of these students might just give up on reading altogether. But I only had so much time with these students in my classroom, and given curricular expectations, I couldn't justify devoting more of that time to independent reading. I was at a loss. How could I possibly add more opportunities for students to read what they wanted without taking time away from the myriad language arts skills that I felt compelled to help them develop?

I had already spent hours agonizing over and adjusting our classroom schedule and had finally reached the point where I felt I was focused on building both writing and reading skills while providing regular windows for independent reading time. I had adapted Atwell's (1987) scheduling suggestions for my 6th-, 7th-, and 8th-grade language arts classes and had created a modified schedule to fit our four-day school week: three days solely dedicated to writing workshop and one day to reading workshop. And even though I would have loved to provide a solid period of independent reading on Thursdays, after we touched on reading strategies and skill building and practiced applying some of these aspects, the amount of time left for independent reading was miniscule. I knew, like many educators struggling with the same feelings, that there just would never be enough time to accomplish everything I was expected and wanted to do. Despite introducing my students to books they would enjoy and cultivating their desire to read, I couldn't adequately provide them with the time to actually immerse themselves in the books. So, as I grappled with how and when I could create more opportunities for my students to read freely, it became evident that I might need to seek support beyond the borders of my own classroom.

The Current Situation

Despite the efforts of educators who work tirelessly to get relevant literature into adolescent students' hands as they transition out of elementary school, the rates at which they voluntarily read begin drop-

ping (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007). While instructional practices like reading workshops and literature circles may be transforming adolescents into readers in our own classrooms, the same might not be true across all contexts. If we truly want to create a nation of readers, we need to stress the importance of reading beyond the confines of our individual classrooms, but we cannot do this alone. One solution may be working with other content area teachers to build reading skills outside the language arts and reading classroom.

School Barriers to Adolescent Students' Reading

When we consider the kinds of reading activities occurring in many classrooms, content area and literature classrooms alike, it should not come as a surprise that we are engaging our students in practices that do not always highlight the recreational nature of reading. Many times students are encouraged to read only from an efferent stance, as seen in the following illustration provided by Rosenblatt (2011): “[T]he student reading *A Tale of Two Cities* who knows that there will be a test on facts about characters and plot may be led to adopt a predominantly efferent stance, screening out all but the factual data” (p. 136). While such an assigned reading activity is intended to improve students’ reading abilities, in fact it may not be contributing much at all. Strommen and Mates’s (2004) research with adolescent readers indicated that even students who enjoy reading do not fully engage in these kinds of assignments and instead simply scan the text to find the correct answers to the teacher’s questions. When recreational reading is excluded from the school day, there is an unintended consequence: students perceive reading as an activity focused on obtaining information to complete predetermined tasks, rather than as a pleasurable experience in which they can enjoy a text aesthetically on their own terms.

Of course, the efferent and aesthetic stances do not exist independently of each other, and depending on the purpose, a reader’s position on the continuum fluctuates between the stances, making them both necessary and applicable in their own right (Rosenblatt, 2011). So while there is a definite place in reading instruction for practices that encourage efferent reading, which is a vital component of close reading and of developing comprehension skills, solely focusing on one stance does not provide our students with

the full experience of reading. If they are constantly exposed to reading activities that they view as fact-finding missions, they are missing the simple enjoyment of the act of reading. This one-sided emphasis on the efferent stance plays a role in decreasing the overall reading motivation of our adolescent students.

As students transition from elementary to middle school, the different organizational format of texts and resulting practices of analysis contribute to a more “teacher-directed” classroom, resulting in an increase in extrinsic motivators and a decline in intrinsic motivators (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). Ivey and Broaddus (2001) highlighted three “themes” in middle school instructional practices that negatively influence middle school students’ intrinsic reading motivation.

First, most reading activities in middle schools do not take into account the “developmental and personal differences between students” (p. 353). Given the wide range of student interests and abilities, it is not surprising that the predominant practice of whole-class reading assignments does not account for individual interests.

Second, middle school curricula do not necessarily match up with what students are interested in learning and reading about. The textbook focus in many middle school classrooms and the absence of a variety of reading materials completely disregard any notion of student choice or interest when it comes to what students would like to learn (Guthrie & Davis, 2003).

And third, students may have a hard time connecting “school reading and writing with their out of school reading and writing” (p. 354). This disconnect is illustrated by the discrepant ways in which students view in-school and out-of-school reading. In-school reading is commonly viewed as a demonstration of performance controlled by extrinsic motivators (grades, teacher approval, etc.). In contrast, out-of-school reading is intrinsically guided and connected to individual lives and interests (McKenna, Conradi, Lawrence, Jang, & Meyer, 2012). Lenters (2006)

If we truly want to create a nation of readers, we need to stress the importance of reading beyond the confines of our individual classrooms, but we cannot do this alone.

argues that schools contribute to this disconnect by ignoring students' reading preferences and by providing students with reading materials that they do not see as relevant to their lives. The fact that students cannot connect the formulized reading assignments found in many classrooms with their own experiences, coupled with students' lack of choice in the classroom, con-

Canadian Children's Book Centre, and the National Council of Teachers of English:

. . . [also] known as recreational reading, pleasure reading, free voluntary reading, and independent reading, is independent, self-selected reading of a continuous text for a wide range of personal and social purposes. (International Reading Association, 2014, p. 2)

This definition is based on the understanding that reading for one's own enjoyment is intrinsically motivated. The position statement also goes on to explore and highlight the many benefits of recreational reading (enhanced comprehension, vocabulary development, general knowledge, empathy, self-confidence, reading motivation, etc.) as further support for the practice, encouraging both teachers and policy makers to create time within the course of a school day to implement the practices of leisure reading within schools (International Reading Association, 2014).

A vast body of research directly links increased amounts of reading with increased academic achievement (Mucherah & Yoder, 2008)—motivation, overall reading ability, writing skills, vocabulary, and grammar skills (Krashen, 2004). But despite the resulting professional recommendations for increased reading time in schools, the average amount of in-school reading time has remained at around 15 minutes per day since the 1980s (Brenner, Hiebert, & Tompkins, 2009). When considering my own classroom context and the potential benefits of providing all of my students with more recreational reading time, I knew I couldn't create more hours in the day, but I hoped to "find" additional time by asking for help from my cross-disciplinary team.

Venturing beyond the Borders of My Classroom

Approaching the other two members of my middle school team with the prospect of creating an all-school—6th, 7th, and 8th grades—-independent reading time was a bit daunting. As many of us know, change is not always welcomed, and I knew that what I was going to ask of my team would require flexibility. I also knew that approaching this from the viewpoint of a language arts teacher was not the answer; I would need to illustrate how this change would benefit all of our students and their work in math and science, as well. Despite my apprehension,

tribute to students' lack of motivation (Guthrie & Davis, 2003).

This tendency to ignore adolescent students' intrinsic desires when considering the reading materials we put in front of them is detrimental for a number of reasons. First, intrinsic reading motivation is linked to higher reading comprehension rates (Wang & Guthrie, 2004). Obviously if students want to read, they are more likely to understand what they are reading. Additionally, students with higher intrinsic motivation to read tend to read around three times as much as students

with lower levels of intrinsic motivation (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). And finally, as Mucherah and Yoder (2008) explain, relying on extrinsic motivators to shape student reading habits in schools is dangerous because "students start expecting rewards for every reading they engage in as opposed to developing an interest in reading for its own sake" (p. 216), which directly conflicts with the goal of creating lifelong readers. Because intrinsic motivation is a vital piece in the puzzle of creating readers, it makes sense that we should encourage its development by exposing students to reading activities that actually increase the chance that they will want to continue reading.

Secondary Students Need More Independent Reading Time

"Leisure reading," as defined by a joint position statement of the International Reading Association, the

When considering my own classroom context and the potential benefits of providing all of my students with more recreational reading time, I knew I couldn't create more hours in the day, but I hoped to "find" additional time by asking for help from my cross-disciplinary team.

I had a number of other factors working in my favor that I knew would be conducive to implementing this change.

First, I was fortunate enough to be part of a solid team with two other teachers (a math teacher and a science teacher) in a small, rural middle school in the Midwest where we enjoyed a relatively high level of autonomy. By way of context, our school, a designated Title I school, was overwhelmingly populated with students who were economically disadvantaged. And while our overall test scores were not alarming, there were students in our school who struggled in all of their classes; many were reading far below grade level. Moreover, a majority of our students self-identified as non-readers on their beginning-of-the-year reading surveys, and many of them indicated that they never read outside of school. Some of these students were not able to list the title of a book that they had read in recent years, and quite a few shared that they had faked their way through reading (and the required book reports) over the last few school years.

Second, we already had a block of time built into our afternoon schedule in which we could potentially implement a recreational reading time while working with our respective classes. Since we were the only content area teachers in the middle school, our students spent most of their day in our classrooms. Our morning schedule was focused on content area work with each grade-level class (average of 15 students) rotating through our classrooms and spending 70 minutes focused on our particular area (math, science, and language arts). The afternoons were spent with our designated “homeroom.” Each of us was assigned one grade level (6th, 7th, or 8th) as a “homeroom,” and in the afternoons, we were expected to teach grade-level social studies and reading—though the content and scope of our “curriculum” for these classes were very ambiguous. While I had already begun using this “reading block” as a recreational reading time for my 7th-grade students, I knew that in the other classrooms, it had become a time in which students read assigned stories from their grade-level anthology series and answered the subsequent questions. The two other teachers were not completely comfortable teaching reading; they had expressed their reservations before, and they were simply doing the best that they could with a lack of reading instruction training and resources. And so it seemed that this

block of time might be better used as a schoolwide independent reading block in which students could read books of choice.

Finally, my team members’ concerns about standardized testing and the influence that students’ reading abilities had on their content area scores would also work to convince the team that a recreational reading time would potentially benefit everyone. We had previously engaged in a number of conversations centered on standardized testing, and at one point, our math team member shared her belief that the math test scores of her students were a reflection of not only math ability but also the students’ varying reading abilities. Similarly, the science teacher repeatedly shared concerns about the difficulties that many students encountered while reading her content area textbooks. If I could convince these two educators that independent reading time would not only relieve some of the pressure surrounding their reading instruction but also had the potential to increase overall reading scores and benefit the students’ performance in their content area classes, I knew that they would support the change.

So, after extolling the benefits of recreational reading and the potential positive effects that improved reading abilities might have on our students’ content area work, my team was on board. It was agreed that all of our middle school students in grades 6, 7, and 8 would spend 30 minutes each day reading books of their choice. At this point, it is important to note that despite our favorable contextual factors (i.e., small school and small class size), our framework, as well as many of the components that will be outlined, could be implemented in a variety of school settings. Larger schools with larger teams, or even smaller schools with smaller teams, could easily adapt the framework to meet their specific needs. Of course, it is important to remember that simply implementing a shared reading time will not necessarily ensure that students will read or be engaged; it is also necessary to develop procedures to help guide the program.

Our Foundation

We began by establishing common ground about what would be acceptable in our classrooms. Our primary goal was to ensure that all students spent the entire reading block actually engaged in reading. We agreed

that this time was reserved solely for student-choice reading. There would be no assignments, and this period was not to be used as a study hall; the only activity allowed would be silent reading. Our students were permitted to read a variety of material during this time, though the main focus would remain on novels and other chapter books. Occasionally, our students were permitted to read magazine articles and other forms of literature, but our goal was to encourage them to make their way through an entire book.

Tracking student participation. To track student reading habits and keep up to speed on what they

were actually reading, we drew upon Nancie Atwell's (1987) reading workshop suggestions and instituted a reading log (see Appendix A) on which students recorded the title of the book they were reading and the date they finished it. Each student needed a teacher's signature on this tracking sheet when he/she finished, or abandoned, a book. Students would then choose another book and add the title to their logs, so at any given time, we could review these logs and know exactly what our students should be reading in class. This helped to address accountability and, for the most part, helped

prevent students from jumping from book to book or chronically forgetting their books at home.

A consistent grading system. The next hurdle we faced was determining how we, as a group, would assign reading grades during this time. We settled on the contract-based system that I had already implemented during my 7th-grade class's independent reading time. We gave students a contract (see Appendix B) that outlined exactly how independent reading time should look (e.g., silent reading, weekly progress in books, each student comes prepared with a book, etc.). On Monday, our students would record the title and page number of the books they were reading. Then on

Thursday, they would record the page numbers again and write one-sentence summaries of what they read/accomplished during that week. This contract system allowed us to quickly assign grades each week and could easily be adapted to accommodate larger class sizes.

We also incorporated self-assessment into our contract-based system. Students assigned themselves a grade based on their participation and actions during reading time each week. Each teacher made notes throughout the week recording student behaviors and participation. The format of these notes varied, as we each used a different method: one teacher only noted problem behaviors; another took more detailed notes on behaviors and progress; and I simply placed a + or - sign next to each student's name in my grade book every day. The students in my classroom quickly learned that if they were off task and required redirection more than once, this behavior would result in a minus for the day, which would affect their weekly grade.

We also tried to converse briefly with each student every week about what they were reading. By limiting these conversations to five minutes, we could easily meet with up to five students in one class period. At the end of the week, each of us was able to quickly review the contracts and meet with any students whose own weekly assigned grade deviated from what we had observed. These contracts not only placed the responsibility of grading on the students, but they also freed us from having to constantly police our students and provided a system for grading that didn't require additional assignments that might impede the goal of simply reading for pleasure.

Access to books. In addition to having guiding procedures in place, it was crucial that we provide students access to books that they wanted to read. Even though we had implemented a recreational reading time, I continued to use the same schedule that I had previously used in my own classroom: three days focused on writing and one day focused on reading. It was during the weekly reading workshop in my own classroom that each class participated in activities that exposed them to new books of interest. The students kept track of the books they wanted to read. Many times, when I obtained new books for our extensive classroom library, the students participated in a "book pass" activity in which they read a few pages of each

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of the books and kept track of the texts they might like to read. This activity allowed them to explore books outside of what they normally would choose and forced them to look beyond the covers.

We also engaged in “book talks” during which students and I would briefly discuss with the class the books we were excited about. Students would then add titles of interest to their “Books I Want to Read” sheets. When they finished a book and a teacher signed off on it, the students were allowed to travel to my classroom and peruse the classroom library for their next book. Only on rare occasions were we faced with the “I don’t know what to read” dilemma, and this process provided us with the structure to direct students to their own lists to find their next book. It also helped ensure that students were finding books they liked and were interested in from the beginning. It helped that I was privy to the books students were reading and knew what they liked to read, enabling me to guide their choices as needed. This removed pressure from the other teachers who, self-admittedly, did not have much knowledge of young adult literature, though as our reading time advanced, they began to join in on the reading time.

Challenges

The biggest challenge that I faced while championing this reading time was the responsibility I felt for its success. I knew students needed to buy into the idea if this was going to work because I couldn’t be in three different classrooms at once. I needed to trust in my team members and avoid overstepping boundaries in their classrooms. One way I kept my pulse on student reading was by personally discussing books in conferences with my students. Each week during our reading workshop, I would conference with each student briefly, and we would talk about what they were reading, their progress, and what was happening in their books (see Appendix C). We would also discuss the students’ favorite aspects of the books and similar books they might enjoy. I kept many detailed notes on each student’s interests and reading habits.

As a team, the biggest challenge we faced was the scrutiny from parents (and even other teachers) regarding classroom instructional time that was spent allowing students to “just” read. Some interpreted recreational reading time as a “time-out” class in which the teacher could simply relax and not work. While I

had shared my vision with the principal early on, and he was on board, I initially found it difficult to justify this so-called downtime to others. In fact, each team member often found herself on the defensive. One way we faced this problem was to arm ourselves with research extolling the benefits of recreational reading (see Appendix D). Later, as we collected data and shared success stories, the objections and questions became less frequent.

Evidence of Collaborative Success

To examine whether or not our efforts were successful, we employed a relatively simple data collection

process. Every quarter, students participated in the required testing regimen (Renaissance Place STAR and Curriculum-Based-Measurement), and at the end of the year, they completed a reading survey. In this anonymous survey, we asked students if they felt they were becoming better readers. (Representative responses are included in this discussion in italics.) When I conferenced individually

with students about their scores, we also talked about what they had been reading, how often they were reading, and how their reading habits may or may not have influenced their scores. The students were surprisingly honest and genuinely interested in their test scores. We ended each conference with setting a reasonable goal (e.g., read at home three nights a week; finish at least one book this quarter; improve by half a grade level) and discussed strategies that might help the student reach that goal (e.g., reading every night before bed, reading higher level books, exploring different genres).

I shared these goals and students’ reading progresses with the rest of the team, and these student conferences formed the foundation for our student-led parent/teacher conferences. Students were able to share their own reading scores and progress with their parents—explaining their growth and what they were doing to work toward their goals. Students could

Students were able to share their own reading scores and progress with their parents—explaining their growth and what they were doing to work toward their goals.

articulate specific gains in reading fluency (“*I can read a lot faster now.*” “*I have gone from reading 125 words a minute to being able to read 160 words per minute.*” “*I am finishing books a lot faster now than I did before.*”), and the results showed that, overwhelmingly, all of our students were experiencing growth when it came to their reading scores. In fact, students were aware of their own growth (“*On my STAR test scores,*

In fact, almost all of our students identified themselves as readers on the end-of-the-year reading survey.

I went from a 7th-grade level to a 12th-grade level.” “*I’ve always just been at my grade level, and this year I have jumped like 3 grade levels!*”), thus increasing their self-efficacy for reading (“*I am reading harder books than last year.*” “*I am making progress in reading.*” “*I am becoming a way better reader.*” “*Since 2nd or*

3rd grade I have barely been able to finish a book.”).

Of course, this growth could have been the result of a variety of different factors, but there was no arguing with the fact that many students were changing their views and outlooks on reading. Again, representative comments from the survey capture their increased volume of reading: “*I do read a lot more than I used to.*” “*I have been reading a lot of new and interesting stuff, also I have been reading a lot more.*” “*I am beginning to like a different type of book.*” “*I have read different genres and have learned some new words.*” In fact, almost all of our students identified themselves as readers on the end-of-the-year reading survey. This was a significant shift from the reading surveys they completed at the beginning of the year. As part of the survey, students were asked to respond to the question, “Do you feel you are becoming a better reader? Why or why not?” All but two students responded affirmatively. Students’ responses indicated increased enjoyment in reading (“*I do feel that I am a better reader because I read more fluently, I comprehend better, and I LOVE reading more and more each day.*” “*I enjoy more things, I have learned more things, so I have been reading different types of things.*”). Additionally, each student could list at least two books that he/she had read throughout the year (“*I’ve read Jane Eyre and Pride and Prejudice [sic] and those are hard books.*”)—even the students who previously had

not finished a book in a number of years (“*Ever since about second or third grade, I have barely been able to finish a book!!!*”).

Finally, the biggest increase in scores and buy-in levels occurred with students who could have been classified as struggling or reluctant readers:

Those who do not have basic conceptual knowledge in history, mathematics, science, or other academic domains; those who do not have the requisite strategies to cope with the increasingly abstract concepts or complex content; those whose self-concept as a reader is based on perceptions of reading as schoolish; and those who have no heart to read or the will to engage—all belong to the ranks of the struggling adolescent reader. (Alexander & Fox, 2011, p. 170)

Many of these struggling students realized that it wasn’t the act of reading that they hated; instead, they discovered that reading could be enjoyable if they could read what interested them. (“*I think I am becoming a better reader because my ckmphensions [sic] gone up and I am beginning to like a different type of book.*” “*I’m reading books I usually wouldn’t.*”)

This progress with struggling students was epitomized in one particular student, a funny and personable 7th-grade boy who began the year reading at a third-grade level and who would, at any given chance, proclaim to the world how much he hated reading. He started the year, reluctantly, working his way through *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Kinney, 2007). When we conferenced at the end of the first quarter, I discovered that although he was resistant to reading, he *really* wanted to read at his grade level, and he was very self-conscious about his reading ability. So we focused on setting reasonable goals, and it actually became my mission to try and find books that he could read and enjoy. And then I came across a text that appealed to a number of adolescent boys in my classroom: *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie (2007). This book helped to transform this student’s attitude towards reading. As he read, there were times he actually laughed out loud, clearly enjoying himself and engaging fully, intrinsically, with the book. While I would love to report that he jumped four grade levels in reading that year, that is not what happened. Instead, he read a few books repeatedly, and we still struggled to find books that fully engaged him, but by the end of the year (according to a number of assessments), he was only about one and a half grade-levels behind his peers. And while, in a perfect

world, every student would be reading at grade level, in this case, seeing his attitude toward reading change completely was a major success for me.

Teachers Partnering to Advance Literacy

The implementation of independent reading is overlooked in many schools for a variety of reasons. At this point in our educational landscape, time that is spent allowing students to read at their leisure is viewed as time that could be better spent prepping for high-stakes tests or closely reading informational texts. Some of the blame for this lack of implementation may also result from policies developed in response to the National Reading Panel report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). This influential report found no research-based evidence (according to its inclusion criteria) demonstrating a positive effect of silent reading on reading skills and fluency. And yet, as mentioned previously, there is an extensive amount of evidence extolling the benefits of independent reading. This suggests that these benefits, along with the influence of independent reading on intrinsic motivation and the process and usefulness of encouraging recreational reading in general, all need to be considered and examined more closely.

Yet independent reading is not even on the radar of literacy professionals. In 2014's "What's Hot & What's Not" list of topics published by the International Reading Association, independent reading did not even make the list (Cassidy & Grote-Garcia). Instead, the list was populated with topics such as close reading and text complexity. In addition, motivation/engagement was rated as "not hot," though the respondents felt it "should be hot" (Cassidy & Grote-Garcia, 2014). When faced with this information, it seems that although the link between motivation and recreational reading should not be ignored, it obviously is not valued. With the current focus on increasing the rigor of texts to meet the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), it becomes increasingly important for students to be motivated and engaged in the reading process to meet the challenges they face. Balancing these instructional experiences with a focus on independent reading might increase motivation and engagement.

In addition to exploring the instructional practices that hinder reading motivation, Ivey and Broaddus (2001) also shed light on the themes that produce positive experiences with literature, including: *responsive teachers* who support literary habits, understand students, and respect their choices while guiding them toward meaningful experiences; *student ownership*, which can be interpreted as allowing student choice and honoring students' own decisions; and *programs that connect* with students' "out of school issues and personal interests" (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001, p. 254). By implementing an all-school independent reading time, our team of teachers was able to touch on all of these themes. And because this practice extended beyond the language arts classroom, our students were exposed to content area teachers who were willing to emphasize the importance of reading, thus demonstrating the value of reading beyond the reach of a singular discipline.

This program was a success, and we, as a team, were approached on more than one occasion by parents who were amazed by the transformations that they saw in their own children as readers. Our students, collectively, were talking about books with anyone who would listen, and they became excited about literature and sharing their experiences. All of this was accomplished by working together to create space and opportunity for our students to freely make their own choices and follow their own interests to explore what they *wanted* to read.

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Appendix A: Reading Log

Name: _____

BOOKS I'VE READ

Title	Author	Date Started	Date Finished/ Abandoned	Teacher Initials
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				
6.				

Appendix B: Reading Contract

I want to earn a(n) _____, and I understand that I must meet all the requirements in order to achieve that grade. I understand all the requirements and will do my best to achieve my intended goal.

<p>A: I will ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be on task in class (book out and reading as soon as class starts). • Maintain my reading log. • Read at least one book this quarter and share a review with the class. • Make weekly progress in my book. • Interact respectfully with other students and my teacher. 	<p>B: I will ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be on task most of the time. • Keep my reading log updated. • Read at least one book this quarter and write a review. • Make weekly progress in my book. • Interact respectfully with other students and my teacher.
<p>C: I will ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be on task most of the time • Occasionally update my reading log. • Make weekly progress in my book. • Interact respectfully with other students and my teacher most of the time. 	<p>D: I will ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggle to be on task. • Likely forget to update my reading log. • Not stick with a book and not come close to finishing any books. • Make weekly progress in my book. • Struggle with respect.
<p>F: I did not read much of the time, I did not finish a book, and my reading log is not up to date.</p>	

Your Name: _____ Sign Here: _____

	Mon.	Thurs.	Grade you think you deserve this week and why:
Week 1			
Week 2			
Week 3			
Week 4			
Week 5			
Week 6			

Appendix C: Teacher-Student Conferencing Guide

Student Name	Week 1: Date/Book/Progress	Week 2: Date/Book/Progress	Week 3: Date/Book/Progress
Student 1	9/20: <i>Looking for Alaska</i> (Green, 2005), p. 40. Asked for brief summary; likes the voice of the main character (sarcastic, witty). Discussed diary entry format including “BEFORE” section title; she is not sure what that means but assumes a plot-changing event and guesses that Miles may get kicked out of school.	9/27: Same book, p 200. Nearly done; read ver fast. LOVED. Talked about why author would write in the format he did. Discussed possibly reading another John Green book when finished— <i>An Abundance of Katherines</i> (Green 2006) or maybe <i>Eleanor & Park</i> (Rowell, 2013)?	
Student 2	9/21: <i>The Things They Carried</i> (O’Brien, 1990), p. 30. Loves military book so likes so far. A little unsure about short story format. Check back and ensure he is following.	9/28: Same book, p 100. Has a good handle on format now. Summarized favorite story.	
Student 3	9/21: <i>Middle School: The Worst Years of My Life</i> (Patterson & Tebbetts, 2011), p. 30. Struggling to get into the book. Likes the humor, but feels it is a bit childish. Check library for other options (low readability—high interest).	9/28: Same book, p. 60. Wants to abandon; can’t really get into it. Seems too childish, but wants some humor. Chose a few for him to look at and choose from. He checked out <i>Holes</i> (Sachar, 1998) at the end of class.	

Appendix D: Research to Support Independent Reading Time

Block, C. C., & Mangieri, J. N. (2002). Recreational reading: 20 years later. *The Reading Teacher*, 55, 572–580.

- “. . . Students who spent more time in recreational reading activities: a) scored higher on comprehension tests in grades 2, 4, 8, and 12; b) had significantly higher grade point averages; and c) developed more sophisticated writing styles than peers who did not engage in recreational reading” (p. 572).
- “Moreover, Smith and Joyner (1990) reported that students who engaged in ongoing recreational literacy activities during school hours read books out of school more frequently and significantly increased their independent reading levels on informal reading inventories. Even when elementary students read for only 15 minutes a day, they significantly increased their reading abilities” (p. 573).

Ivey, G., & Broaddus, K. (2001). Just plain reading: A survey of what makes students want to read in middle school classrooms. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36, 350–377.

- “. . . Adolescent students who participate in programs that connect literacy with real-life out-of-school issues and personal interests indicate more positive feelings about reading and writing in school” (p. 354).

Krashen, S. (2008). Free voluntary reading: Still a great idea. *CEDER Yearbook*, 1–11.

- “In experimental studies, students who participate in ‘sustained silent reading’ consistently outperform those in traditional classes” (p. 2).

Strommen, L. T., & Mates, B. F. (2004). Learning to love reading: Interviews with older children and teens. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 48, 188–200.

- “The preponderance of research findings suggest that few children, skilled readers or not, choose to devote their leisure time to reading” (p. 188).
- “Krashen concluded that children who frequently read for pleasure ‘will become adequate readers, acquire a large vocabulary, develop the ability to understand and use complex grammatical constructions, develop a good writing style, and become good (but not necessarily perfect) spellers. Although free voluntary reading alone will not ensure attainment of the highest levels of literacy, it will at least ensure an acceptable level (p. 84).’ Those who do not develop the habit of reading for pleasure may have ‘a very difficult time reading and writing at a level high enough to deal with the demands of today’s world (p. x)’” (p.188).

Insider or Outsider?

Using Young Adult Literature and Experiential Learning to Understand the Other

Author Madeleine L'Engle (1993/2002) wrote, “Story makes us more alive, more human, more courageous, more loving.” Stories invite readers to experience lifestyles, habits, and perspectives that are different, foreign, or unusual in comparison with their own. On the journey through stories, readers often discover, however, that others’ customs, habits, and beliefs are not as dissimilar as they may have once believed.

Teachers, librarians, and authors have long understood the power of story to help readers expand their own perspectives and to see through the lens of the other. But how can we, as individuals who share this belief, create learning spaces for adolescents that bring these perspectives to life beyond the pages of a book? In this article, we—Dawan and Maichael—discuss how students in Maichael’s 7th-grade language arts class used young adult literature to explore the perspective of “the other” by investigating this theme within their own community. Specifically, we discuss how simulated learning experiences allowed students to experiment with social norms while investigating the question, “What does it mean to be an insider and an outsider?” These experiences invited students to reexamine their own communities and consider the “other” from potentially new perspectives.

“What Does It Mean to Be an Outsider?”

The Inquiry

As Maichael considered her inquiry question—“What does it mean to be an outsider?”—she knew

she wanted students to learn more than just textual analysis. Seventh graders often struggle to connect with scenarios they haven’t personally experienced, proving problematic not only academically as they try to understand texts, but also socially in situations that call for empathy. For this reason, one of her affective objectives required students to try and understand the perspectives of others. She hoped to use literature to help her students consider the perspectives of those on the margins, thus interrogating how it felt to be an “outsider” and how social pressure and expectations can affect their choices and lived experiences.

Recent changes within the once rural, predominantly white, farming community where she taught during the 2012–2013 school year prompted Maichael to consider this question. As fields were plowed under and neighborhoods sprouted, an influx of outsiders moved to the area, resulting in a 42% increase in population over the last 13 years. The new additions to the community included many families of Latino heritage. The number of Latino students in the district had almost doubled since 2006, increasing the diversity of religions, cultures, languages, and beliefs within the school. These changes necessitated increased awareness of and empathy toward differences among the students at her school and within the larger community. As Dawan (who taught at a nearby university) and Maichael discussed these changes, Maichael felt that exploring the perspectives of those who felt like outsiders through literature would help her students consider the implications of this question in their own lives.

The Text

Although Maichael's affective goals for this unit drove the inquiry, she also considered the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) as she thought about the texts she might teach as part of this unit. Her goals also included providing literature-rich opportunities to analyze the development of theme (CCRA.RL.7.2), to compare and contrast the points of view of characters (CCRA.RL.7.6), and to use evidence from the text to support written analysis (CCRA.RL.7.1). Ultimately, she wanted a text that would allow students to explore multiple perspectives, encourage students to relate to characters different from them, and foster an engaging reading experience.

Finding a single piece of young adult literature to explore the question wasn't the challenge; a myriad of engaging YA texts present provocative and thoughtful explorations of this question and provide a valuable entry point into this inquiry (see Fig. 1). However, her choices were limited by ever-shrinking book budgets (particularly inaccessible to a first-year teacher), as well as very strong community traditions governing the books and topics students were allowed to explore. She felt tensions pulling at her from both sides; she wanted to help bring about greater empathy and acceptance within the community, but to do so, she also needed a text that students would be allowed to read. Ultimately, school resources and district guidelines helped her settle on S. E. Hinton's 1967 classic *The Outsiders*.

The Rationale

As she considered her ultimate objectives, Maichael wrestled with questions about how to help students genuinely inquire into what it means to be an outsider, and she sought ways to make the themes real and relevant beyond the pages of the novel. As Richard Bullough (2006) explained,

We tend to learn what we do or are allowed and encouraged to do . . . inside and outside the school. On this view every non-trivial social interaction, not just those between the teacher and child, has an educational and moral weightiness. Similarly, every social institution carries an education burden, whether acknowledged or not, because "we never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment" (Dewey, 1916, p. 22). (Bullough, p. 80)

In other words, students needed direct experience with these concepts to understand the import of the issues in their own lives. After brainstorming ideas with Dawan, Maichael realized that students needed opportunities to experiment with the question in their lives beyond the classroom, particularly within their community.

Ultimately Maichael settled on a final assignment she called the "Outsider Experience" that required students to simulate a situation in which they were an outsider and then gauge and respond to the reactions of the people around them. Simulations, a type of experiential learning (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984), are not new to the English language arts; teachers frequently use simulations to help students master content and themes (McCann, 1996) and to personalize central conflicts in the text through experiencing similar situations (Mindich, 2000). Because simulations bring abstract issues in texts to life, they help achieve affective objectives not easily met through traditional methods, particularly the building of empathy and the fostering of multiple perspectives (Arnold, 1998; Johannesen, 1993). They also provide a safe framework for students to "experience feelings of failure, poverty, excessive pressure, futility, hopelessness, and helplessness" within a controlled environment (Kachaturoff, 1978, p. 222). As a result, it seemed to be the perfect strategy for achieving the objectives.

Facilitating the Outsider Experience

Defining the Terms

With her objectives and standards aligned and with her culminating assessment in place, Maichael scaffolded her instruction to help students interrogate the question and prepare for their outsider experience. To begin the unit, students needed to understand the vocabulary associated with the inquiry question, the novel, and their impending experiences.

As the class began reading the novel, they simultaneously explored the connotations of the words "insider" and "outsider." To help students begin unpacking these terms, Maichael asked them to consider the following questions in an independent writing activity: *Think of a time when you have felt like an insider and then analyze your experience: What happened? Who was involved? How did you feel? Why did you experience those emotions?* As students began writing, they

Suggested Texts for Exploring “What Does It Mean to Be an Outsider?”

Time-Tested Whole-Class Novels

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian. Alexie, S. (2007). Arnold Spirit Jr. details in words and illustrations his experiences as he transfers to an all-White high school, causing the reader to question stereotypes about poverty, Native Americans, abilities, and culture. (Grades 8–12)

American Born Chinese. Yang, G. L. (2006). This graphic novel tells three separate but interconnected stories of characters with Chinese heritage. It calls into question stereotypes and assumptions we make about ourselves and others. (Grades 7–12)

The Perks of Being a Wallflower. Chbosky, S. (1999). Told through the eyes of the high school outcasts, this novel explores the challenges and triumphs of being othered in this volatile and exhilarating time of life. (Grade 11 and up)

Stargirl. Spinelli, J. (2000). Upon her arrival, the mysterious Stargirl purposely seems to push social norms and expectations at her high school. But once everyone stops critiquing her actions, they begin to ask questions about themselves and their own choices. (Grades 6–8)

Wonder. Palacio, R. J. (2012). This story details the triumphs and challenges experienced by Auggie when he begins his first year at public school as the kid with the deformed face. The narration allows readers to experience the story through multiple viewpoints. (Grades 4–6)

Classroom Library Must-Haves

The Beginning of Everything. Schneider, R. (2014). When everything Ezra knows seems to be falling apart, he discovers the difference between the person others think you are or want you to be and the person you choose to become. (Grades 9–12)

Eleanor and Park. Rowell, R. (2013). On the surface, Korean American Park and offbeat Eleanor seem unlikely friends or sweethearts, but the chronicle of their year together reveals that there is more to most everyone than what a first impression reveals. (Grades 9–12)

If I Ever Get Out of Here. Gansworth, E. (2013). Racism, poverty, and the delicate nature of adolescent friendships are explored through the stories of Lewis, a teen bullied because of his American Indian heritage, and George, the new kid in town. (Grades 8–12)

It’s Kind of a Funny Story. Vizzini, N. (2006). When the pressures and anxieties of attending a prestigious high school for future executives drive Craig to attempt suicide, he gets checked into the psych ward. Here, life with his new peers expands his perspective and causes him to question how much he really needs to live up to the expectations of society. (Grades 9–12)

Looks. George, M. (2009). Meghan and Amiee struggle with their weight in totally opposite ways, but for the same reason. Through their friendship, the two take to task their fears and challenges, telling the high school experience through the lens of these characters. (Grades 8–11)

Mexican WhiteBoy. De la Peña, M. (2010). Even with a 95 mph fastball, Danny’s appearance causes people to label him before they even have a chance to know him. But his story helps readers question their own identities and the definitions society imposes on individuals. (Grades 9–12)

Openly Straight. Konigsberg, B. (2013). Rafe: an athlete, a writer, and a teen who doesn’t experience discrimination because of his sexual identity but who also wants to be someone other than “the gay guy.” Stepping into the closet at his new school allows him the freedom he craved, but causes him to wonder about what it really means to be true to himself. (Grades 9–12)

Personal Effects. Kokie, E. M. (2012). Matt is devastated by the death of his brother in Iraq, but if he wants to hold on to the remnants of his brother’s life, Matt has to reconcile his assumptions about others with those his brother embraced. (Grades 9–12)

Ten Things I Hate About Me. Abdel-Fattah, R. (2010). Jamilah is a 16-year-old Lebanese Muslim. She has changed her appearance and name to become a blonde-haired, blue-eyed teen who wants to be called Jamie. She struggles to figure out how to embrace and honor her heritage while finding the acceptance and friendships she desperately seeks. (Grades 9–12)

Out This Year

All the Bright Places. Niven, J. (2015). One kid is popular; the other an outcast. But when one of them attempts suicide, the two are brought together and wind up navigating a series of adventures that help them both see through the eyes of the other. (Grades 10–12)

Fish in a Tree. Hunt, L. M. (2015). Life at Ally’s new school proves tough, as the big secret about her reading ability seems to be increasingly hard to hide. But as she learns more about herself, she realizes her own labels and those of others aren’t always accurate. (Grades 4–8)

The Question of Miracles. Arnold, E. (2015). Iris and Boris are middle schoolers on the outskirts, but their reluctant friendship takes them on an exploration of life’s big questions and possibilities. (Grades 4–7)

Figure 1. Suggested texts for exploring “What does it mean to be an outsider?”

identified and later shared personal “insider” stories of when they felt accepted or part of a group (see Fig. 2). For example, one student wrote this analysis about his football team: “I felt like we were kind of a family and helping each other out so we could do a good job. We could trust each other more because we came together and helped each other out.” Others shared similar experiences as a part of teams, clubs, church groups, or at gatherings of friends and family members.

To help students understand what it might mean to be an “outsider,” Maichael showed a clip of an old *Candid Camera* episode. This particular episode documents what happened when people did something simple, but outside the expected social order: in this

case, facing the back of an elevator instead of the front (access on Vimeo at <https://vimeo.com/61349466>, or access a more contemporary re-creation of this experiment on the TV show *Would You Fall for That?* at <http://abcnews.go.com/WhatWouldYouDo/video/fall-elevator-19922451>). As the students watched unsuspecting citizens rotate around an elevator in response to the movement of others, they hypothesized about the causes of such actions: *What did it mean to be an outsider in these situations? How much of the people’s behavior was motivated by desires to fit in? How did these people feel about being outsiders in seemingly innocent social situations?* In each class, students generally concluded that the experiment demonstrated

Insider Experiences

Think of a time when you have felt like an insider (examples: on a sports teams, with friends at school/church/clubs, at family gatherings). Describe your experience below.

Now analyze your experience:

What happened in order to make you a part of the group?

Who was involved?

How did you feel?

Why did you experience those emotions?

Figure 2. Graphic organizer to help students analyze an “insider” experience

that people don't like being outsiders and sometimes conform to feel like an accepted part of the group (see Fig. 3).

Synthesizing the connotations, experiences, and ideas shared in the discussion, students then crafted their own definitions of these terms. One student explained, "I think that being an outsider means that maybe you're a loner or don't belong or fit in with a certain group. I think that being an insider means that you have a lot of friends, you fit in with the group, and you feel accepted." Another concluded, "To me, an outsider is someone who doesn't normally fit in with the crowd. . . . Feeling like an insider is one of the greatest things. As an insider, you never feel as though you don't have anyone to rely on. An insider fits into every situation and understands how to socialize."

This discussion and the definitions crafted provided students with their first opportunities within the unit to brush up against one another's experiences and connect with the characters. Ultimately, the dis-

ussion and writing exercise served as the foundation for the essays students would write as the culminating assessment for the unit.

Dialoguing with the Reading

As the class progressed through the novel, discussions continued about what it might feel like to be accepted in a group as opposed to rejected as an outsider in society. Students identified and analyzed specific examples of this construct as evidenced by the Socs (Socials) and the Greasers from the text. The characters' opinions of each other, their actions around their friends, and their talk to one another all depicted stereotypical views of their rival groups. These components of judgmental biases, mirrored by so many other characters in other young adult novels, resonated with Maichael's adolescent students who constantly battled to be appreciated and accepted by their peers.

Inspired by the novel, class discussions explored how or why people are classified within their own communities in and out of school. Students examined

Outsider Experiences

Watch the Candid Camera clip of the man in the elevator. Then answer these questions:

How was his behavior influenced by his desire to fit in?

What did it mean to be an outsider in this situation?

How did he feel about being an outsider in this seemingly innocent situation?

Define the terms "insider" and "outsider" in the space below:

Figure 3. Graphic organizer to help students analyze an "outsider" experience

common stereotypes and then analyzed their own biases. This discussion led students to acknowledge the existence of an “in” accepted category and an “out” unpopular group in school as well as within other locations of social interaction. It also included speculation about why and how bullying occurs, merging schoolwide topics of interest into the language arts curriculum.

Through this strategy, students were able to make connections with the characters in the book. In the essay required at the end of the unit, students dedicated a paragraph to comparing their own experiences to those of a character from the text. They related to the loyalty felt between members of the Greasers as they spoke of their own insider experiences with friends and family. One student wrote, “I think the person I relate to the most in my experiences is Johnny. For example, when Johnny felt so happy for saving the children, it relates to me when I felt happy for making points for my team.” Similarly, students discussed feeling a connection to the Greasers when they were stereotyped and ostracized from social interactions. Referring to her outsider experience where she depended upon her family to help her feel comfortable in a foreign country, that same student wrote, “Since [Johnny] is the gang’s pet and is shy around people he doesn’t know, that relates to me and my outsider experience.” After doing this assignment, students expressed that it was now easier to find connections between themselves and the characters.

Nel Noddings (1984/2003) explained, “The purpose of dialogue is to come into contact with ideas and to understand, to meet the other and to care” (p. 186). Ultimately, the dialogues that resulted from exploring both the insiders and outsiders in the book initiated discussion about similar issues in the students’ own society and created a strong foundation for the concepts they were about to experiment with in their own lives. Their classroom dialogue began a process that continued throughout the unit as students began to see through one another’s eyes and listen to one another with care.

Creating the Simulation

At this point in the unit, students had analyzed “outsider experiences” multiple times within the novel, made personal connections to the experiences

of characters in the book, and formulated their own analyses as a class. Maichael then initiated the simulation component of the assignment with the following invitation:

As we have read S. E. Hinton’s book, *The Outsiders*, we have discussed what it might feel like to be an “insider” in a group as opposed to an “outsider” in society. Now it is your turn to experiment with the themes we have discussed. Choose an opportunity to act like an outsider. Then analyze how people acted in response to you and how you felt.

To help students consider what it means to experiment with the concept of “insider” and “outsider” within their community, the class revisited the *Candid Camera* clip they watched at the beginning of the inquiry. However, this time the discussions that followed explored what the experimenters (or insiders) did as well as how the participants (or outsiders) reacted. As the class unpacked the experience, they discussed how this clip modeled the essential components of their own experimental analysis.

Next, the class brainstormed scenarios that might cause students to feel like “outsiders.” Ideas included sitting with a different group at lunch without being invited or performing acts that defied social customs, such as standing too close to other people while talking or wearing clothing incorrectly. These ideas ranged from the outrageous and loud to quiet acts of social defiance, but all students chose an experiment they felt would personally challenge them. Although student choice was encouraged, the class agreed that their experiments should not distract others from learning or do harm to others and that they would need parental approval. Allowing this choice not only differentiated the assignment to satisfy the unique needs of each student, it also provided students autonomy in making decisions about the kind of situation that would push them and allowed them to deal with the responses that resulted. Once they decided on their projects, it was time to turn them loose.

Students had two weeks to complete their projects and then one week to write and revise their essays, which consisted of three parts (see Fig. 4). First, students defined what it meant to be an “insider” using description and analysis of the insider experience they had identified at the beginning of the unit. Next, they described and reflected on their outsider experiences. Guiding questions similar to those listed earlier helped students describe and analyze their experiences in

“What does it mean to be an insider? What does it mean to be an outsider?”

The Task: As we have read S. E. Hinton’s book *The Outsiders*, we have discussed what it might feel like to be accepted in a group as opposed to rejected as an outsider in society. Now it is your turn to experiment with the themes we have discussed in class. You will brainstorm and write about a time when you have felt like an “insider.” Then to counter this, you will choose an opportunity to experience being an outsider and analyze how people reacted to you and how you felt.

Rules: Your outsider experiment cannot interrupt nor detract from any classroom experience in my or any other class. Check with your parents before trying an “outsider experience” outside of school. Be creative! The more you push yourself out of your comfort zone, the more you will be able to understand and analyze the experience of an outsider.

Some ideas of “outsider” experiences include: sit with a different group of friends at a different table at lunch; go to a service at a church in which you don’t usually congregate; do something that is usually seen as socially awkward (stand too close to people while talking to them, wear your clothes backwards, hiccup in between every sentence, etc.). You may want to check your experiment off with Ms. Mayans and your parents before proceeding.

Project Elements and Expectations

Part A: We have all had experiences where we feel comfortable in a group. These are “insider” experiences. Brainstorm times when you have felt like an insider. Choose one of these experiences as a basis for writing one paragraph (7–10 sentences) detailing the experience. Give details, reasons, and evidence of why you felt like an insider in the situation. Afterwards, write an analysis of the experience. Your analysis of this insider experience should be a strong paragraph (5–7 sentences).

Part B: Have an outsider experience. The experiment should push you to do something you haven’t done before. The purpose of this experiment is to do something that will make you feel “outside” of a group or culture. Reflect on this experience. Write a paragraph describing the experience in detail and another paragraph analyzing how you felt and how people acted toward you (similar to Part A).

Part C: Compare your experience to that of one of the characters in the book. Choose one character and analyze how your outsider/insider experiences are similar or different to that of this character. Give concrete examples from the book in your comparison.

Due Dates:

- Project given:
- Insider Rough Draft:
- Outsider Rough Draft:
- Final Draft of paper:

Essay Outline

- Paragraph 1. Introduction and thesis
- Paragraph 2. Your insider story
- Paragraph 3. Analysis of your insider story
- Paragraph 4. Your outsider experience
- Paragraph 5. Analysis of outsider experience
- Paragraph 6. Comparison between you and a character in the book
- Paragraph 7. Conclusion

Put all of these parts together to create your final essay. You will have a 7-paragraph essay in the end.

Figure 4. Assignment sheet

writing, including how others reacted and what they themselves felt during the experience. Specifically, Maichael asked students to consider the following as they crafted their discussion of their outsider experience:

- What did you do?
- How did you feel?
- What did people do/say to make you feel this way?
- How do you think your experience might influence the way you interact with people in the future?

The final essay component required students to compare their own insider or outsider experiences to those of one of the characters in the novel. Drawing on textual evidence and specific examples from their own lives, students explored the similarities and differences between these comparisons. Figure 5 details the rubric used to guide and evaluate their essays.

As students completed their experiments and worked on their essays, informal discussions buzzed throughout the classroom. For example, as one student animatedly explained what she had done, students nearby commented on and questioned her about her experience. The discussions proceeded naturally and were not limited to just the student and the teacher. Instead, everyone present in the classroom encouraged everyone else. These informal classroom discussions ultimately helped build anticipation as students prepared for the final presentations where they shared their experiences with one another. The discussions also seemed to motivate many of the students who had not yet completed an experiment to do something. At the end of the unit, the statistics reinforced what these observations suggest: While Maichael averaged about 75% participation on assignments and projects from the students in her classes throughout the year, 95% of her students submitted essays about these projects and participated in the analytical discussions that followed.

Analyzing Their Work

Student responses demonstrated significant insights that resulted directly from the simulation and likely would not have been possible if students had not been able to experiment with these ideas in the community. First, students discussed feelings of discomfort that resulted from breaking social norms. For example, Bracken, a shy, petite girl, described the stares and

disapproval she experienced as she paid for a candy bar and a drink at a local store in pennies and dimes. She wrote, “When the cashier saw all the money, he looked at me like I was joking and then started counting them. I heard someone behind me in line mutter, ‘Pennies, really?’ I started feeling really uncomfortable and awkward after they said that.” Her reaction was akin to many other students’ who described feeling judged because others didn’t understand the motivations behind their behavior. Bracken’s experience and others like it provided opportunities for the class to discuss differences in habits, customs, and approaches that may differ from the norm but that aren’t necessarily wrong. As students explored the varied motivations behind the choices they made, they began to realize that the wrong assumptions made about them paralleled those they sometimes make about other people.

Some students went beyond challenging social norms and entered real situations as legitimate outsiders. In her presentation, Leah described attending a different church when she visited her cousin in Mexico. Both as a religious and a linguistic outsider, she wrote:

My cousin introduced me to many of her friends [but] I felt awkward. They talked about school stuff, and it felt weird because I didn’t know anything they were talking about. I stood out a lot. I lost my way to class and couldn’t pronounce the words well, so I only spoke English to my cousin.

In this and other instances, students labeled their feelings as “awkward” or “weird,” and then described empathizing with Cherry, Johnny, and Ponyboy, drawing parallels between the alienation felt by the characters and those they felt as a result of their simulations or personal experiences. Experiencing, even briefly, what it meant not to be a part of the dominant group helped them see the challenges faced by the characters more clearly. Sharing this kind of experience led to class discussions about people who might feel like outsiders in their own community as a result of language or religious differences and how students might bridge these differences and help others see the value of diversity within the community.

Many parents and community members proved eager and willing to participate in the students’ experiences by supporting and pushing their students’ learning at school into the home and community (Darling-Hammond, 1996). For example, one father wanted to maximize the learning for his daughter, Ashlee, an

Grade Rubric for Insider/Outsider Essay

Name: _____

Class Period: _____ Date: _____

1. Ideas (40 points) _____

- Essay reflects the guiding theme (“What does it mean to be an insider? What does it mean to be an outsider?”).
- Effective and interesting stories/examples are chosen.
- Sufficient detail is included to allow the reader to imagine the experiences.
- Analysis paragraphs address 2–3 key points about each experience, which are easily applicable given the stories explained.
- Comparison to a character in the book is accompanied by both similarities and differences.

2. Organization (15 points) _____

- Organization follows the set format given by the teacher (P1- intro, P2- insider experience, P3- insider analysis, P4- outsider experience, P5- outsider analysis, P6- character comparison, P7- conclusion).
- Paragraphs contain clear information that pertains to the topic sentence.

3. Voice (10 points) _____

- Voice is unique to the author and makes the essay both personable and insightful.

4. Word Choice and Sentence Fluency (20 points) _____

- Essay is balanced with concrete detail and commentary from the student.
- Words have been carefully chosen to make the essay detailed.
- Comparison paragraph effectively uses a combination of concrete detail taken directly from the book and commentary about how this compares to the student’s experience.

5. Conventions (10 points) _____

- Essay is free of errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
- Sentences are varied (simple, compound, and complex) and add diversity to the paragraphs.

6. Process (5 points) _____

- Student had a rough draft on the specified due date.
- Student adequately peer-edited another student’s paper.

Total Points Possible: 100

Figure 5. Essay grading rubric

attractive, academically successful student who was popular among her peers. When he heard about the project and Ashlee's initial idea, he challenged her to consider doing an experiment that would really push her beyond her current realm of experience.

With her father's help, Ashlee dressed to appear homeless and overweight, then walked into the local Walmart to do some shopping. Stares and whispered comments immediately made her feel uncomfortable. In her analysis, she wrote,

During this experiment I felt so embarrassed. I didn't even want to walk around in front of people. I wanted to just put my head in the corner and not even make any eye contact with anyone. The only people I even wanted to look at were my close family. Right then I felt like I hated everyone. Just because of the looks and comments they made. I am glad that I did do this project though. I have learned so much and now I know I will not judge anyone for what they look like or act like.

As she talked about her experience with the class, Ashley's feelings resonated with most of the students; they all felt a measure of discomfort and self-consciousness. But more significant, all had their eyes opened to the impact of their actions and opinions on those they saw as "outsiders" from the dominant cultures in our area. Through her simulation, the help of her parents, and a desire to learn something personally relevant, Ashlee admitted that her view of people who are different from her had changed.

Nearly all of the students wrote about their increased awareness of social norms, empathy toward others, and their new insights concerning how these themes played out in our community. In addition to relating to the characters, students found ways to relate to each other and to others in their community. The personal relevance of their simulated and actual experiences emanated from essays that demonstrated strong understandings of themes in the novel as well as connections to characters' experiences.

Incorporating Outsider Experiences with YA Lit: Considerations and Cautions

Young adult literature can serve as a catalyst for student learning when it comes to issues significant to young people and their community. Although the discussion here uses *The Outsiders* as the text that guides this approach, a myriad of quality YA texts center on this theme. The list of suggested texts in Figure 1

(p. 47) provides a variety of novels for different grade levels and interests. The suggestions that follow discuss additional ideas and recommendations for those interested in implementing this assignment in their own classrooms.

Initially, Maichael feared that the outsider experience component of the assignment might alienate shy students and discourage them from participating. However, allowing students to choose a situation that would push them individually helped them willingly engage. Allowing additional student choice in both the text and the outsider issues studied may also prove motivating. For example, a similar inquiry could be conducted wherein teachers create book clubs or literature circles organized around a variety of texts. At their weekly book club meetings, students could discuss the shared text with other members of their group. As the different groups finish reading their texts, the teacher could use a jigsaw strategy to organize students in groups with those who read different texts. This arrangement facilitates discussion across stories, helping students see multiple perspectives and connect with characters from a variety of backgrounds.

Students also seemed motivated by opportunities to discuss issues already at the forefront of their minds—specifically, the defying of social norms, significant social pressures, and being "othered"—through personal and group reflections on their simulated experiences and connections to their books. Just as students benefitted from hearing about a variety of different outsider simulations, students may also benefit from listening to their peers relate to characters from a variety of self-selected texts. Building in moments for reflective dialogue might help ensure that students ultimately benefit from the simulation as a learning experience and make meaningful connections to the texts. Embedding opportunities for debriefing and discussion of the experience in the final assessment helped students build strong connections to their books and make the themes relevant to their own lives.

Finally, engaging with applications of the ideas in the texts ultimately provided students with opportunities to wrestle with issues relevant to them while also taking an active role in their own learning. This process also reached beyond the students and maximized the learning experiences when parents and commu-

nity members became involved. As teachers conduct simulations with their classes, monitoring student participation and, if possible, involving parents and community members to most fully enhance the learning experience, they will find that these lessons have the power to move students beyond the initial reading of the text and influence society outside of school.

We encourage teachers to consider how experiential learning and simulations can help extend student learning beyond the walls of the classroom and into local communities. Through sharing both our stories and our experiences, we can come to better understand and empathize with those around us even as we undermine stereotypes and learn to recognize elements of the “other” in ourselves.

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The *Wonder* of Empathy:

Using Palacio's Novel to Teach Perspective Taking

In the era of Common Core-driven curriculum (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), teachers face difficult decisions about how much time to dedicate to fiction. Amid perceived and real pressure to divert time to nonfiction, educators must consider the potential cost of such a trade. Today's measurement-driven educational climate may not leave room for character development, but even fictional educators recognize that it should. At the end of R. J. Palacio's middle grade novel *Wonder* (2012), Mr. Tushman, the school principal, explains the importance of an award he is about to give. (No spoilers here. If you want to know who wins, read the book.)

Courage. Kindness. Friendship. Character. These are the qualities that define us as human beings, and propel us, on occasion, to greatness. And this is what the Henry Ward Beecher medal is about: recognizing greatness. But how do we do that? How do we measure something like greatness? Again, there's no yardstick for that kind of thing. How do we even define it? (Palacio, 2012, p. 304)

The prosocial qualities Principal Tushman describes require empathy: the ability to recognize, understand, and share another's feelings. Measuring "greatness" may be problematic, but psychologists have developed tests for different aspects of empathy as well as a prerequisite skill—theory of mind—which includes the ability to interpret nonverbal cues and to distinguish one's own beliefs from another's. In recent years, psychologists have shown increased interest in the ability of narrative fiction to enhance both empathy and theory of mind, abilities nonfiction has never

been shown to mimic (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar, Oatley, Hirsch, de la Paz, & Peterson, 2006; Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2008). There is now strong empirical evidence for a long-held assumption of many teachers: reading fiction helps students develop socially as well as academically.

This emerging field of study can benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration between English teachers and psychologists. While psychologists can provide behavioral measures, teachers are best equipped to select appropriate books and activities that will most engage students. The growing body of research addressing fiction's impact on empathy can inform curricular choices, particularly when the issue of reducing time devoted to literature arises. Here we describe a collaborative research project by an English teacher from an independent school and an academic psychologist from a liberal arts college. The major finding was that sixth-grade students showed improved scores on a common psychological empathy assessment after completing an academic unit on *Wonder*.

Empathy and Fiction: What Research Tells Us

It is helpful to place the collaborative project in the context of recent psychological research. Reading fiction is hypothesized to simulate social contact in a way that minimizes anxiety, allowing reduction of prejudice and development of empathy (Johnson, Jasper, Griffin, & Huffman, 2013b; Mar & Oatley, 2009). Mar et al. (2006; 2008) found that frequent adult readers of fiction, but not nonfiction, had higher empathy

and better theory of mind skills than less frequent readers.

Mental engagement with the story is necessary for empathy enhancement (Bal & Veltcamp, 2013; Johnson, 2012; Johnson, Cushman, Borden, & McCune, 2013a). There is also evidence that, in adults, improvements in empathy and theory of mind come more from “literary” fiction, defined as “writerly” fiction that actively engages the reader, than from “readerly” fiction that entertains passively (Kidd & Castano, 2013). Whether that distinction is meaningful for younger readers is not known.

Ironically, even as evidence for fiction’s empathy-enhancing effects in adults mounts, a movement is underway to reduce the amount and variety of fiction studied in secondary school in favor of informational nonfiction reading (Bauerline & Stotsky, 2012). If anything, fiction would be expected have a stronger prosocial effect on younger readers. Empathy skills, particularly concern for others and the capacity to readily take another’s perspective, increase dramatically during adolescence (Hawk et al., 2013; Van der Graaf et al., 2014). Secondary school is also when students begin to learn literary analysis, a topic often introduced during the middle school years by the study of young adult literature (YAL; Bushman, 1997).

While schools have traditionally valued the study of literature for teaching language and reasoning skills (Bauerline & Stotsky, 2012), there is now increasing evidence for additional social benefits of reading. Mar, Tackett, and Moore (2010) found that even for preschool-aged children, higher exposure to children’s books was associated with better theory of mind, a finding that closely parallels the effects of fiction in adults. At least for adults, the positive impact of fiction on interpersonal skills is not duplicated with nonfiction (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar et al., 2006; 2008).

Reading Fiction Reduces Prejudice in Schoolchildren

Teachers often select books with the goal of promoting prosocial behavior, but only rarely do they collaborate with behavioral scientists to collect empirical data and determine if the goal was met. To our knowledge, the adult correlational studies that show improved interpersonal skills with fiction but not nonfiction exposure (e.g., Mar et al., 2006; 2008) have not been repeated in school-aged readers. However, there have been at least three school-based studies on the capac-

ity of reading assignments to increase compassion and reduce prejudice in young people.

After hearing and discussing a series of children’s stories that positively portray characters with disabilities, British elementary schoolchildren expressed improved attitudes toward and an increased willingness to befriend disabled children (Cameron & Rutland, 2006). In a second study, twelve-year-old Italian children who were given a summer reading assignment from a list of books with protagonists from other cultures showed less prejudice against immigrants than children who were given a comparable list of books without intercultural themes, or those who were given no assignment (Vezzali, Stathi, & Giovannini, 2012).

In a third and well-publicized study in this field, Vezzali, Stathi, Giovannini, Capozza, and Trifiletti (2014) used a six-week experimental manipulation with 17 Italian fifth-grade students, exposing them to selected readings from the Harry Potter series (Rowling, 1998–2007) that were critical of prejudice and engaging the children in weekly discussions of the excerpts. A control group experienced readings and discussions about other wizardly topics like Quid-ditch and buying wands. Tests given before and after the intervention showed that readers who heard the anti-prejudice selections improved their attitudes toward a stigmatized group (immigrants) more than the controls, but only if they strongly identified with Harry. Vezzali et al. (2014) followed the experiment with fifth-graders with a larger correlational study of high school students and found that students who read more Harry Potter books and identified with Harry reported less prejudice towards homosexuals, even though sexual orientation was never addressed in Rowling’s series. Unlike the fifth-graders, the high school students had presumably read the Harry Potter books in a more leisurely setting and did not experience the wizard-themed anti-bigotry lessons.

Ironically, even as evidence for fiction’s empathy-enhancing effects in adults mounts, a movement is underway to reduce the amount and variety of fiction studied in secondary school in favor of informational nonfiction reading.

Socializing in the Fictional Realm Eases Anxiety

These three studies (Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Vezzali et al., 2012; 2014) are based on the hypothesis that reading reduces prejudice through indirect social contact with a targeted group (Mar & Oatley, 2009). Whereas real-life contact with an obvious outsider might be frightening, fiction provides simulated con-

tact where a young person can “get to know” someone different in a safe setting. Long-term prejudice reduction requires learning to adopt a target’s viewpoint. Vezzali et al. (2014) also found that college students who had read more Harry Potter books and rejected identification with Voldemort reported less prejudice

against refugees and were more likely to agree with perspective-related statements like “It is easy for me to jump into a refugee’s shoes.”

Other school-based programs use popular YAL as a tool to enhance social acceptance and reduce bullying, but empirical evidence of their effectiveness is often lacking (e.g., Hebert & Kent, 2000; Hillsberg & Spak, 2006). The debate over the place of literary study in the curriculum raises multiple questions: Do adolescents show the same empathetic responses to fiction, but not nonfiction, as adults? Is the distinction between “popular” and “literary” fiction meaningful to younger students? Can teachers use the same popular YAL students choose for themselves not only to teach literary skills but also to promote empathy? Could replacing fiction with nonfiction in the curriculum harm empathy development and increase antisocial behavior? Such questions are best addressed by collaborative efforts between educators and behavioral scientists to both design appropriate curricula and evaluate their effectiveness.

The Current Study

Plot Synopsis

Wonder enjoyed 115 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list and appeared on both the *School Library Journal’s* Best of Children’s Literature and *Publishers Weekly* Best of Children’s Books lists in 2012. Its

protagonist, a fifth-grade boy named Auggie, has been home-schooled his entire life because of profound cranio-facial deformities and the surgeries he required. Auggie’s parents decide that the first year of middle school is a good time for him to begin attending school at Beecher Prep. Auggie is anxious about other students’ reactions to his face.

Mr. Tushman, Beecher Prep’s principal, arranges for three students to meet Auggie before the school year begins: Jack, Charlotte, and Julian. In Mr. Tushman’s eyes, these are welcoming, kind students. It doesn’t take long, however, to figure out that Julian’s behavior fails to match adults’ perceptions. Throughout the novel, he bullies Auggie in ways both subtle and overt.

Jack finds himself sitting next to Auggie in each class, and while he resents this at first, eventually he gets to know Auggie, and the two develop a friendship. Nevertheless, under pressure from other students, Jack says hurtful things about Auggie, not realizing that Auggie is overhearing. Auggie is devastated and wants to leave school. Jack and Auggie are able to mend their relationship, but as a result, Julian begins to victimize Jack along with Auggie.

Happily, Julian’s bullying campaign does not succeed. In the end, while on a class nature retreat, several of Auggie’s classmates demonstrate support for him by defending him against older students from another school who verbally and physically attack Auggie because of his unusual appearance. Although his condition will clearly continue to challenge him, Auggie finds acceptance from his peers.

Rationale and Aims

WHY WONDER?

Wonder was chosen for several reasons. First, it is written on a fifth-grade reading level, making it easily accessible to our sixth-grade students as the first book of the school year. Second, its setting, Beecher Prep, a selective and expensive private school that provides need-based aid to lower-income children, shares some similarities with our own school, the Episcopal School of Baton Rouge. Third, we thought that Auggie’s anxiety about fitting in with new peers would resonate with our students. Approximately 30% of the sixth-grade students were new to Episcopal, creating the potential for bewilderment as new social groups formed. Fourth, *Wonder* is told from various perspec-

Could replacing fiction with nonfiction in the curriculum harm empathy development and increase antisocial behavior?

tives. The story features the voices of five characters other than Auggie, all with their own conflicts, offering multiple opportunities for students to empathize with characters. While Auggie is the obvious, visible outsider, other characters also struggle with wanting to fit in and be accepted. Last, Palacio's goal in writing the book was to promote empathy, which she calls "the antithesis of bullying" (Walsh, 2013, p. 1). Our collaboration provided an opportunity to see whether or not the author succeeded.

THE STUDY'S GOALS

The purpose of the present study was to determine if reading *Wonder*, combined with related classroom activities on characterization, perspective, and empathy, could increase empathy. Rather than evaluate changes in specific prejudice, as did Cameron and Rutland (2006) and Vezzali and colleagues (2012; 2014), we used a more general empathy test. Auggie's medical condition is rare; most students will never encounter anyone with the same level of facial deformity. However, if compassion for Auggie generalizes to anyone whose differences make them the target of bullying, nonspecific empathy skills should increase.

A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

This research was a joint endeavor of an English teacher, Martha Guarisco, who designed and implemented the lesson plans; a guidance counselor, Alicia Kelly, who led the class through empathy-building activities; and a psychology professor, Louise Freeman, who arranged the computer-based empathy testing and analyzed the data. The collaboration arose from the First Annual Young Adult Literature Conference and Symposium, held at Louisiana State University in June 2014, where Guarisco and Freeman met and discovered their mutual interest in the effects of fiction on empathy.

Method

Participants

Participants were 80 sixth-grade students (38 male, 42 female) from Episcopal School of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, an independent school with one of the highest tuitions in the city. Twenty-two percent of students receive need-based financial aid. Parents of the participants gave informed consent for participation, while the students gave written assent. The school principal

gave permission for the study, and the Institutional Review Board of Mary Baldwin College (Staunton, VA) approved all survey procedures.

Procedure

EMPATHY PRE-ASSESSMENT

The *Wonder* academic unit began in September 2014 and lasted for 5–6 weeks. Before reading began, we administered the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983), a well-characterized and validated measure of general empathic tendencies. It contains 28 statements scored on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all like me, 5 = very much like me). Seven items measure interpersonal reactivity for four subscales: Empathic Concern (feelings of sympathy and concern for others in distress); Perspective Taking (the tendency to adopt another's point of view); Personal Distress (the tendency to share another's pain or distress); and the Fantasy Scale (the tendency to transport oneself mentally into fictional works). Sample items include:

- I often have tender, concerned feelings for people who are less fortunate than me (Empathic Concern).
- Before criticizing people, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place (Perspective Taking).
- I sometimes feel helpless when I see people in the middle of a very emotional situation (Personal Distress).
- When I am reading a good story or novel, I imagine how I would feel if the events in the story were happening to me (Fantasy Scale).

We made minor adaptations in the original Interpersonal Reactivity Index to make the reading level more age-appropriate. Students completed the Interpersonal Reactivity Index on school computers using the Qualtrics survey system. To assure anonymity, they chose code names for themselves and were instructed to use the same code on the assessments before and after the unit so that individual changes could be measured. Students were also asked their gender and whether they had read *Wonder* prior to the school assignment.

CHARACTERIZATION AND LITERARY PERSPECTIVE

Before they started reading, students were placed into random groups of four and assigned a particular

character to “watch” over the course of the novel. As they read the text, they marked sections that revealed something about the character they had

been assigned: a physical description; the reaction of another character; or something the character revealed through dialogue, thought, or action.

To highlight the complexity of the novel’s characterization, students did close readings of two chapters that show the same scene—Auggie cutting off a braid he had been growing for years—from two different perspectives, that of Auggie and his high-school-aged sister Via. The student groups considered characters’ actions and underlying emotions. They examined the roles of Auggie, Via, and their mother, compiling their analysis on a chart and determining which components the three characters would have

known about at the time. They concluded that characters would have knowledge about each other’s emotions only if there had been some dialogue about them.

RESPONSIVE WRITING

Before students began the novel, they wrote a five-minute response to a prompt asking them to define what “normal” meant to them, then shared and discussed the responses. After defining normal, students wrote a longer, multi-paragraph piece on how they *defied* normal, exploring the question: *What makes you unique from your peers?*

Throughout *Wonder*, Auggie’s English teacher, Mr. Browne, gives his students “precepts” as writing prompts. He explains the precepts as words to live by, or guiding principles. He asks his students to choose their own precept and send it to him on a postcard over the summer. Our students used some of Mr. Browne’s precepts as writing prompts during the unit.

They also used the iPad Brushes application to create self-portraits mimicking the novel’s artistic style. At the end of the unit, they selected their own personal precept, attached it to their self-portraits, and shared with the class on a website.

Another responsive writing assignment addressed a sensitive issue within our own school. Auggie’s friend Jack is a scholarship student who, in one scene, feels stigmatized by his wealthier classmates. Before reading this chapter, students responded to a writing prompt that we hoped would help them better understand Jack’s perspective: “*Does class matter at Episcopal?*” Following the writing, they engaged in discussion.

EMPATHY TRAINING EXERCISE

About two weeks after beginning the book, the students participated in an activity with middle school guidance counselor Alicia Kelly on empathy and perspective. They traced their shoe on a piece of paper and wrote a few descriptors (physical traits, favorite activities) of themselves on the opposite side. Students placed their shoe outlines around the room and followed a set of verbal instructions to move to and stand on a new set of shoes. Based on criteria the counselor announced, students tried to guess in whose shoe they were standing.

The guidance counselor tied the activity into *Wonder* by explaining how little students can know of a person by a physical trait like shoe size. Because students were reading a section told from Via’s perspective, she asked them to generate a list of emotions that Via was feeling. Like Auggie, Via is also a new student in her school and is struggling to find her place as her friendship group shifts. The counselor emphasized that it is normal to feel sad and hurt when excluded. She ended the lesson with video clips about kindness and had students think of ways they could show kindness in their daily lives at school.

LITERARY ANALYSIS

Throughout the unit on *Wonder*, lessons focused on the “writerliness” of the novel, especially on Palacio’s use of allusions and idiomatic phrases. Students became familiar with common literary terms, such as setting, conflict, and characterization. Their culminating evaluation, completed in their original groups, was to create and present a “character-in-a-bag” that

The students’ Perspective-Taking scores showed a small but statistically significant (5.8%) increase after the unit, compared to their initial score. The other empathy subscales did not change significantly. This suggests that after the unit, students saw themselves as more readily adopting others’ psychological viewpoints.

included an illustration of the assigned character, evidence to support whether the character was static or dynamic, three important quotations, and descriptions of conflicts that the character faced. Inside the bag, they included ten objects that somehow represented the character.

Most literary activities were typical for a language arts classroom and were designed to help students build comprehension and analysis skills. Aside from the special lesson by the guidance counselor, the main empathy-building exercise was directing students to look at the story from a given perspective. The structure of the novel guided students as they read; additional support came from the focused highlighting and note taking students did in their groups.

FINAL EMPATHY ASSESSMENT

About one week after reading was finished, during the week of the final group projects, students took the Interpersonal Reactivity Index again. We hypothesized that one or more of the empathy subscale scores would increase from the first to the second test session.

Data Analysis

The effects of gender, prior book exposure, and changes in empathy between the first and second tests were evaluated by mixed-design analysis of variance, followed by post-hoc testing. Relationships between gender and prior book exposure were evaluated by a Chi-square test for independence.

Results

Thirteen students failed to complete both surveys or provided non-matching codes, leaving 67 participants (32 males, 35 females). Fifteen students (3 males, 12 females) had read *Wonder* prior to the class assignment, with girls significantly more likely to have read the book than boys.

The students' Perspective-Taking scores showed a small but statistically significant (5.8%) increase after the unit, compared to their initial score. The other empathy subscales did not change significantly (see Table 1). This suggests that after the unit, students saw themselves as more readily adopting others' psychological viewpoints. There were no differences between males and females on any empathy measure.

Students who had previously read *Wonder* scored higher on the Fantasy Scale for both sessions (see

Figure 1). Prior exposure to the book made no difference in any other Interpersonal Reactivity Index measure. Prior readers showed the same specific gains in Perspective Taking as young people who had not previously read the book.

Discussion

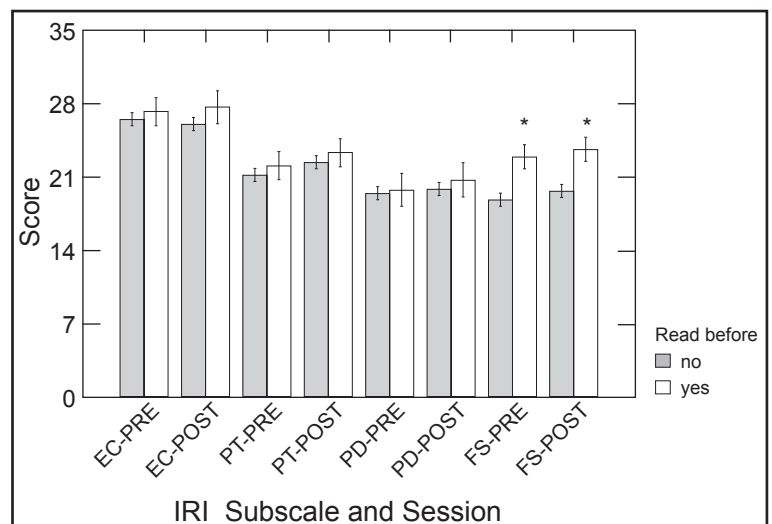
Confirmation of Hypothesis

Our prediction that the *Wonder* unit would enhance empathy was confirmed. Since the effect was specific

Table 1. Exposure to *Wonder* is associated with higher average scores on perspective taking in young readers.

IRI Subscale	Before <i>Wonder</i>	After <i>Wonder</i>	Change in Score
Empathic Concern	26.72 ± 0.545	26.42 ± 0.619	- 1.1 %
Perspective Taking	21.40 ± 0.569	22.64 ± 0.545	+ 5.8%*
Personal Distress	19.57 ± 0.591	20.10 ± 0.577	+ 2.7%
Fantasy Scale	19.75 ± 0.583	20.61 ± 0.606	+ 4.35%

*Significant increase in second test session, $p = 0.01$. Scores are given as means +/- standard error of the mean.



*Students who had previously read *Wonder* had higher Fantasy Scale scores before and after the *Wonder* unit. Of the four empathy scales measured, only the Fantasy Scale (FS) was significantly different in students who had previously read the book ($N = 15$) and those who had not ($N = 52$). Prior reading did not reduce the benefits of studying *Wonder* in school; prior readers showed an increase in Perspective Taking comparable to nonreaders. EC = Empathic Concern; PT = Perspective Taking; PD = Personal Distress. Error bars indicate standard errors of the mean.

Figure 1. Pre- and post-reading statistics for four empathy scales.*

for only one of the four subscales, it is likely that these young people genuinely perceived themselves as better perspective takers. If students had tried to please the teacher by giving “nicer” answers on the second session, we would have expected increases in all of the subscales.

GENERALIZED EMPATHY

Our study differed from previous school-based studies in the way we measured empathy. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index is a multipurpose scale that targets no specific group. Earlier studies on reading and prejudice reduction in young people (Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Vezzali et al., 2012; 2014) measured readers’ attitudes toward members of specific marginalized groups. Only the Vezzali et al. 2014 study on the Harry Potter series specifically measured perspective-taking skills, but that research was limited to college students and a more specific survey about the viewpoints of refugees rather than the Interpersonal Reactivity Index. To our knowledge, ours is the first study that connects young reader’s exposure to fiction with improved skills in adopting the psychological perspective of others. Such nonspecific empathy is probably

necessary if compassion for a specific fictional group is going to extend to other groups, as in the case of the Harry Potter books (Vezzali et al., 2014).

EMPATHY ENHANCEMENT SPECIFIC TO PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Given *Wonder’s* emphasis on different character viewpoints, it is not surprising that Perspective Taking was the empathic trait that specifically increased. Other studies using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index have also found that fiction-induced enhancement of empathy is limited to Perspective Taking. Stansfield and Bunce (2014) used three of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index subscales (Empathetic Concern, Perspective Taking, and Personal Distress) as a pretest before exposure to a story. They found that Perspective-Taking scores, but not the other two subscales, were higher in the more frequent readers. Pilot data recently collected at Mary Baldwin College found that students who had read all seven Harry Potter novels had higher Perspective-Taking and Fantasy Scale scores than students who had read four or fewer; Empathic Concern and Personal Distress did not differ (Freeman, 2015, unpublished).

Other contemporary YA novels also use multiple points of view; examples are listed in Table 2. These

Table 2. Other middle grade and young adult novels written from multiple perspectives

<i>Title</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Publisher</i>	<i>Published</i>
<i>American Born Chinese</i>	Gene Luen Yang	Square Fish	2006
<i>A Fast and Brutal Wing</i>	Kathleen Jeffrie Johnson	Square Fish	2004
<i>Eleanor & Park</i>	Rainbow Rowell	St. Martin’s Griffin	2013
<i>Jellicoe Road</i>	Melina Manchetta	HarperTeen	2010
<i>Keesha’s House</i>	Helen Frost	Square Fish	2013
<i>My Most Excellent Year</i>	Steve Kluger	Speak	2009
<i>Poison Ivy</i>	Amy Goldman Koss	Square Fish	2006
<i>Real Time</i>	Pnina Moed Kass	HMH Books for Young Readers	2004
<i>Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants</i>	Ann Brashares	Ember	2001
<i>Witness</i>	Karen Hesse	Scholastic Paperbacks	2003
<i>The Year of Secret Assignments</i>	Jaclyn Moriarty	Scholastic Paperbacks	2004

books represent a wide range of content and style; what they have in common is how easily they could be used to help students examine perspective.

FICTION AND THEORY OF MIND

Multiple researchers have found that reading fiction also enhances a trait necessary in adopting another's perspective: theory of mind, or the ability to discern the emotions, beliefs, and intentions of others. Tests for theory of mind skills typically involve determining a participant's emotional state through observation of his/her eyes or facial expressions or identifying the effects of another's false beliefs. Mar et al. (2006; 2008) and Djikic, Oatley, and Moldoveanu (2013) administered author name recognition tests for fiction and nonfiction writers, along with different theory of mind tests. Theory of mind abilities correlated positively with recognition of fiction writers, but not nonfiction writers, suggesting that higher theory of mind scores were associated with lifetime exposure to fiction, but not to nonfiction. Kidd and Castano (2013) replicated that finding on some, but not all, of their correlational studies; Stansfield and Bunce (2014) failed to find such a relationship but used a much smaller sample size.

Kidd and Castano (2013) also found that a brief session of reading literary fiction, but not nonfiction or popular fiction, was also associated with an increase in theory of mind scores. Interestingly, one of the traits Kidd and Castano used to define "literary fiction" was the presentation of multiple perspectives. While some might scoff at labeling a novel written on a fifth-grade level as "literary,"¹ *Wonder* uses multiple narrators and depicts the same events from different points of view at a reading level appropriate for middle school readers. While we did not measure theory of mind skills explicitly in our students, the task that asked students to chart different emotions to determine what one character knew about another's emotional state and how and when they learned it might be considered specific training in theory of mind skills.

1. Vezzali et al. (2014) argue that the Harry Potter series also meets the definition of literary fiction, so children's and young adult books do not seem to be automatically excluded from this category.

Possible Reasons for the *Wonder* Unit's Effectiveness

SIMULATION OF SOCIAL CONTACT

According to the indirect social contact hypothesis (Mar & Oatley, 2009; Vezzali et al., 2012), reading about Auggie allowed students to "meet" a child very different from themselves in the safe arena of fiction.

An in-person encounter with someone as disguised as Auggie might have produced significant discomfort in sixth graders; in the fictional world, they experienced contact with him vicariously, while also getting an inside look at the hurt Auggie feels when people react negatively to his appearance. At the same time, seeing the perspectives of other characters showed students they are not alone in their possible discomfort; even Auggie's sister at times feels awkward around him.

Beyond the indirect contact reading provided in itself, several activities in the *Wonder* academic unit incorporated specific elements that past research suggests would increase the intensity of simulated social contact and thereby enhance the book's capacity to induce empathy.

TIME ALLOWED FOR EFFECTS

The *Wonder* unit lasted 5–6 weeks, similar to other school-based studies in prejudice reduction (Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Vezzali et al., 2012; 2014). Although some studies (e.g., Djikic et al., 2013; Johnson, 2012; Johnson et al., 2013a; Kidd & Castano, 2013) found immediate enhancement of empathy by a short reading, Bal and Veltkamp (2013) found it took a week after the reading experience for empathy to rise, implying that a clear memory of and reflection on the fiction was necessary. This " sleeper effect " is one that teachers need to acknowledge. It takes time for students to process what they have read and for the story to affect them in positive ways. Although our increase in Perspective Taking was small, it was present a

Several activities in the *Wonder* academic unit incorporated specific elements that past research suggests would increase the intensity of simulated social contact and thereby enhance the book's capacity to induce empathy.

week after reading was completed and 3–4 weeks after the guidance counselor-led perspective exercise.

DRAWING THE READERS INTO THE NOVEL

Wonder was specifically chosen because of the poten-

tial for students to identify with the protagonists.

Effective books induce strong identification with characters and emotionally transport readers into the story; for example, Vezzali et al. (2014) found that prejudice reduction in school-aged students required strong identification with Harry Potter.

Some of our exercises were designed to make the students feel like they were Auggie's classmates. By following an assigned character, our students were asked to "get to know" the character much as Jack, Charlotte, and Julian were asked to befriend Auggie. Writing responses to Mr. Browne's precepts, as if they were in English class with Auggie, also likely

helped to mentally transport the students into Auggie's world.

Our results are consistent with those of studies with adults (Bal & Veltcamp, 2013; Johnson 2012; Johnson et al., 2013a; Stansfield & Bunce, 2014) that found that fiction-induced empathy requires active engagement with the story. Johnson et al. (2013a) reported that training in imagery generation (imagining objects or events in multiple sensory modalities) increased emotional transport into the story more than focusing on the meaning of words or reading a story without instruction. The assignments to illustrate a *Wonder* character and create a character bag required the students to both visualize the character physically and consider objects the character might use or encounter frequently. This exercise might have

generated meaningful imagery and enhanced mental transport into *Wonder*.

As illustrated by the Harry Potter series (Vezzali et al., 2014), a story does not have to be realistic to engage readers, but readers do have to suspend their disbelief. Bal and Veltkamp (2013) found that if a reader was not transported into the story, empathy levels could actually decrease with reading. Teachers must help students become drawn into the story and pace instruction so that students maintain their enthusiasm. Additionally, teachers bear responsibility in making effective text selections for students, which requires that teachers know their readers. A text that is too difficult or complex or one in which readers cannot identify with the conflict or characters may fail to engage students.

AN APPROPRIATE AGE

Fiction is particularly useful in increasing Perspective Taking in adults who are lower in that tendency at the onset. Djikic et al. (2013) implemented a similar but shorter-term study than ours, measuring Empathetic Concern and Perspective Taking immediately before and after reading a short story. Like us, they found increases only in Perspective Taking and only in participants who started with lower Perspective-Taking scores. Those with higher beginning Perspective-Taking scores may not have had as much room for measurable improvement.

Similarly, Johnson et al. (2013b) found that narrative fiction reduced prejudice against Arab Muslims only in individuals with low beginning Perspective-Taking scores, suggesting that people who do not readily take the viewpoint of others benefit more from fictional social encounters. If fiction is most influential in people with lower Perspective-Taking skills, it would be expected to be particularly effective in younger adolescents, whose empathic skills are developing and who have lower Perspective-Taking scores than older teens and adults (Hawk et al., 2013; Van der Graaff et al., 2014).

GENDER AND PRIOR EXPERIENCE

Interestingly, we found no significant differences between boys and girls on any Interpersonal Reactivity Index subscale. By age 13, girls typically have higher Interpersonal Reactivity Index scores than boys, and

The assignments to illustrate a *Wonder* character and create a character bag required the students to both visualize the character physically and consider objects the character might use or encounter frequently. This exercise might have generated meaningful imagery and enhanced mental transport into *Wonder*.

differences increase as young people mature (Hawk et al., 2013; Van der Graaff et al., 2014). We likely failed to see a gender difference in empathy either because our students were younger (10–12) or because of our smaller sample size. However, Vezzali et al.’s Harry Potter series study (2014) showed that fifth-grade girls were less likely to stigmatize immigrants than boys, even with a fairly small sample (13 males, 21 females). It is also possible that gender differences in prosocial traits are more obvious in specific reactions to others than in the more general Interpersonal Reactivity Index measures.

Although *Wonder* features a male protagonist, girls were more likely to have read the book prior to the school unit. Even though prior readers were a small subsample (15/67 participants), students who had read *Wonder* previously had significantly higher Fantasy Scale scores in both the first and second empathy inventories. The Fantasy Scale may be a measure of how much one enjoys fiction (Nomura & Akai, 2012). The simplest explanation is that those who had read *Wonder* independently were more voracious and enthusiastic readers than their classmates.

It is important to note that students who had previously read *Wonder* were not higher on Empathetic Concern, Perspective-Taking, or Personal Distress scores at the start of the study and showed the same increase in Perspective Taking after the classroom experience as the other students, suggesting that neither specific exposure to *Wonder* nor their general reading habits reduced the benefits of studying the book in school. While we should avoid generalization based on this small sample, in this case, explicit study, not just the independent reading of *Wonder*, was necessary to increase Perspective Taking. This is consistent with Johnson et al.’s (2013a) finding that participants instructed to read a story as they would for leisure did not experience increases in emotional transport, empathy, or prosocial behavior.

Does Higher Empathy Lead to Better Behavior?

One weakness of our study is that we measured empathy only by the students’ self-reports; we collected no data on any behavioral changes. Though the ability to empathize by adopting another’s viewpoint is important in reducing both bullying and prejudice (Hillsberg & Spak, 2006; Vezzali et al., 2014), we have no direct evidence that the improved Perspective-Taking scores

led to more kindness in the classroom. However, other studies suggest that emotional engagement with fiction leads not just to higher empathy, but also to real-world kindness. Johnson et al. used willingness to either assist the researcher in picking up “accidentally” dropped pens (2012) or to participate in a new professor’s 20-minute psychology survey for payment of only \$0.05 when higher-paying studies were available (2013a) as measures of helping behavior. Those with higher story-induced empathy and emotional transport were more likely to help and were more sensitive to nonverbal cues that signal a need for help. Similarly, Stansfield and Bunce (2014) reported that, after reading a fictional story about an African orphan, people with higher Fantasy Scale scores and higher story-induced affective empathy were more likely to request information about helping real orphans.

Student Reactions

We have anecdotal evidence for positive responses to the activities in the *Wonder* unit. In the first writing assignment, the majority of students offered descriptions of themselves as the definition of normalcy. For example, one girl who is herself a dancer wrote that a normal person “does sports such as if it was a girl dance and a boy football.” A particularly lively discussion stemmed from the suggestion that a normal sixth-grade boy played multiple sports. “What about the kids who don’t?” asked one student. “They’re still normal.” Another posed a question about which sports were normal. If the athlete played lacrosse, a sport that isn’t yet common in Louisiana, was that still normal? Students continued to widen their defining terms. Ultimately, they collectively agreed that there is no such thing as a normal sixth-grader and that terms like “average” or “typical” would be easier to define.

After the empathy exercise, students placed their ideas for showing kindness on a “Choose Kind” poster. One student wrote, “If someone is sitting by

While we should avoid generalization based on this small sample, in this case, explicit study, not just the independent reading of *Wonder*, was necessary to increase Perspective Taking.

themselves, go and sit with them.” This could be seen as a way that the student was relating to Auggie; finding companions in the school cafeteria was one of Auggie’s biggest concerns. Another student posted, “Invite people that you don’t know well to your house

so you can get to know them better.” This provides another connection to Auggie; it is when he is invited to his classmates’ homes that his friendships begin to blossom.

In response to the writing prompt about class differences, students were quick to identify the role that class and money play in their social world. One girl wrote: “I

realize the one thing most people would do anything for: money. So, not being as rich as other people might [make them] think of you as a social outcast.” Another boy recognized an important aspect of class at the end of his response:

People in poverty don’t even have enough money for food. If they can’t pay for food then they can’t pay for education. Say you got a scholarship. You would still have to pay fees. Most people who go to Episcopal have lots of power.

Discussion after this assignment was clearly uncomfortable territory, with extra squirminess and wide-eyed glances around the room. Despite the difficult conversation, it was important for students to understand the role that class conflict plays in Jack’s character development as a scholarship student. Teachers will sometimes have to shepherd students through difficult territory; providing a safe environment is important in facilitating honest discussion.

Finally, the students’ personal precepts reflected both creativity and compassion. Quotations came from diverse sources—from Ernest Hemingway to Vince Lombardi to Katy Perry. Some found their inspiration in *Wonder* itself, taking its message, “Choose Kind,” to heart. One girl rewrote the message, making it her own, “My precept is ‘Never forget the little parts of kindness in life.’ . . . Kindness should be a rule of life, to always be kind. Also to remember the kindness people gave to you and that you gave to them.”

One boy concluded with a quotation from his character-in-a-bag assignment:

I chose Charlotte Cody’s precept from *Wonder*, “It’s not enough to be friendly, you have to be a friend,” because that’s how I live and feel. It means that it isn’t enough to just go and check on somebody to make sure they’re okay. You actually have to mean it.

Directions for Future Research

Our findings demonstrate the usefulness of collaborative work between educators and behavioral scientists. There are many reasons for keeping literature as the centerpiece of secondary English classes: building vocabulary, stimulating analytical thinking, enhancing language skills, and boosting college preparedness (Bauerlein & Stotsky, 2012). But psychologists can provide another: evidence for narrative fiction’s empathy-promoting effects—an ability that, at least in adults, is not shared with nonfiction (Mar et al., 2006).

If the capacity for empathy development is going to be used to defend the continued emphasis on literary fiction in English classes, more collaborative research is needed. It is essential that other books be evaluated for their ability to promote prosocial attitudes in order to determine whether empathy enhancement is a general characteristic of quality fiction or limited to certain types. Does a novel have to be told from multiple perspectives or carry an explicit pro-acceptance message to be effective? Must specific types of classroom exercises supplement the reading for maximum benefit?

Another urgent need is to determine whether nonfiction fails to enhance empathy and theory of mind skills in school-aged children, as it does in adults. This question could be addressed by a before-and-after administration of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index in conjunction with a collaboration between a behavioral scientist and a teacher doing a comparable 5–6 week unit using a collection of nonfiction titles. Alternatively, correlational studies of empathy measures or theory of mind tests with age-appropriate author or book recognition tests for fiction and nonfiction could be conducted in young readers as they have been for adults and preschoolers (e.g., Mar et al., 2006; 2008; 2010). Psychologists would undoubtedly need help from teachers and librarians in designing and validating such tests.

Psychologists have other measurement tools that could be useful in determining the mechanisms through which fiction exposure enhances empathy and which other mental processes might also be af-

Our findings demonstrate the usefulness of collaborative work between educators and behavioral scientists.

fected. It would be interesting to know if an academic unit on a multi-perspective novel can improve theory of mind in middle grade and high school students and if factors like emotional transport into the story or identification with characters are necessary to improve Perspective Taking. Again, collaborative efforts between psychologists and educators are needed to design and carry out such studies.

Conclusion

Palacio's *Wonder* provided a successful start to the school year because of its accessibility, rich character development, and themes. Its message to "choose kindness" helped set the tone for a safe learning environment. The classroom activities for the unit were specifically designed to cultivate imagery, engage the students with the characters and story, and introduce the concept of perspective in both a literary and psychological sense. When used with students at an age appropriate for the cultivation of empathy skills, the result was a significant increase in Perspective-Taking scores by the end of the unit. While the explicit message of *Wonder* may be to show kindness to people with physical differences, it appears that, with the right exercises, the result is improvement in non-specific empathy skills needed for generalization of compassion to a wider social circle.

Atticus Finch taught his daughter Scout, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (Lee, 1960, p. 39). He also read to her nightly, until reading became as natural to her as breathing, despite the Maycomb County education system's best efforts to squelch her enthusiasm. Modern research suggests a powerful connection between engagement with fictional worlds and the ability to see through another's eyes—a connection that teachers, parents, and policy makers would be wise to keep in perspective. In a 2013 panel sponsored by the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Palacio remarked, "Empathy is something that is very difficult to teach, but it is something that can be inspired in children" (Walsh, 2013, p. 1). Whether through the inspiring story of *Auggie*, the classroom teaching that accompanies the reading, or a combination of both, Palacio's novel can help children see things from another's point of view, an essential component of empathy.

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What Are Book Clubs Doing in *Health Class*?

Enhancing Learning and Making Empathetic Disciplinary Connections through YA Novels

They sit in circles, looking through their notes and paging through young adult (YA) novels, talking excitedly about characters, issues, conflicts, and decisions. As one student talks, others nod; some point to passages in their books. This could be a book club meeting in any middle school or high school English language arts classroom in any school in the country, but it is not. It is a university classroom, and the class is Current Health Education Issues.

The use of YA book clubs in the Current Health Education Issues class emerged from a collaboration between faculty members in two programs within the university's College of Education: Adolescent Education and Health and Physical Education. The book club project was designed by the instructor of the Adolescent Literature course and implemented by the professor of the course on current health education issues. The majority of students in this course were preservice teachers, and the collaboration and project had two major goals: for students to learn about a variety of health issues through young adult novels, supplemented with additional research, and to introduce future teachers to the advantages of incorporating book clubs across the curriculum, in all content areas, including health class.

According to the Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching (2014), advantages of collaborative teaching/team teaching include potential deep student learning as a result of exposure to the connections across the disciplines of the instructors, different disciplinary views, and the broad support that a het-

erogeneous teaching team can provide during lessons. The collaborative opportunity between the instructors of the adolescent literature and health education courses became evident during a discussion of the implications on instruction of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The goal of the CCSS is to establish clear, consistent guidelines for what every student should know and be able to do in math and English language arts from kindergarten through 12th grade, with potential expansion to other subjects as developed by discipline organizations. The CCSS focus on developing the critical-thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills students will need to be successful in their lives upon graduation (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The partners in this study worked to create a bridge between two disciplines that resulted in reading and writing across the curriculum, providing students experience with an instructional methodology that supports the goals of the CCSS. Ultimately, the project promoted student application of knowledge through higher-order thinking skills.

For this project, students participated in book clubs in which small groups of students read texts selected by members of that particular group (Roessing, 2009). There are a multitude of advantages, academic and affective, to book clubs:

- Book clubs are social, as are adolescents.
- Book clubs train students in collaborative work and encourage the development of listening and speaking skills.

- Book clubs promote leadership skills by being student-led; the teacher serves only as a facilitator and observer, not a leader or club member.
- Book club members provide support and motivation for one another. With this support, students can read more complex texts, and group discussions can lead to deeper understanding.
- Book clubs encourage differentiation. The teacher can offer books at various reading and interest levels so that students can choose books that they *can* read and comprehend and on topics of interest to them.
- The class can read multiple genres—such as fiction, nonfiction, graphic novels, and verse novels—or multiple topics/titles within a genre (Anderson & Corbett, 2008; Chase & Pfeifer, n.d.; Daniels, 2002; Ebert & Culyer, 2011; Lloyd, 2006; Parkay, Hass, & Anctil, 2010).

A key goal of book clubs is to help teachers assess students' comprehension through their responses to

literature (Nigro, 2011; Roessing, 2009). The use of student-led discussions offers the potential to engage all students through a more democratic, dialogic approach (Lloyd, 2006). The club meeting format encourages students to ask relevant and focused questions and clarify their understanding while teachers gauge students' comprehension based on their contributions to the discussion (Nigro, 2011). The concept of book clubs has

expanded from practice in language arts to all content areas. Integrating young adult literature in content-area curriculum can raise relevant issues through which content-area teachers can address critical concepts while igniting authentic discussion (Hill, 2009). Book club practice offers an alternative approach to examining the discipline-specific content.

Within health education, traditional illnesses—such as cancer and diabetes—and behavior-related problems—such as substance abuse, eating disorders, sexually transmitted infections, depression, and gun-

related violence—have become interrelated due to the multitude of physical, social, and emotional changes adolescents are experiencing (Bowman, 2000). To date, there is minimal documented evidence of the use of book club practice in health education courses. However, by reading YA novels in a health education class, students may learn more about a given health issue than just the facts; they may learn how people are affected physically, psychologically, emotionally, and socially. They may develop empathy as they come to care about characters and their issues. Readers might also analyze more deeply as they converse in book clubs about these issues and collaboratively make connections to what they have learned in class or through class texts, articles, or research about these issues. Conversations about health issues become more profound as book club members share observations about the characters in their novels, how they handle different issues, and how their personalities and circumstances affect their situations and vice versa. Often these conversations lead to personal connections that students share in their book club communities.

Methods

Course Context

The overall goal of the Current Health Education Issues course was to instruct students in health education content and health behaviors, knowledge they will utilize in their future roles as teachers of health education in middle and secondary settings. Upon successful completion of the course, it was expected that university students would be able to:

1. Describe and apply theoretical foundations of health behavior and principles of learning.
2. Describe and apply methods of assessing and promoting emotional, physical, and mental health over the lifespan.
3. Describe and apply knowledge of disease etiology and prevention practices.
4. Demonstrate health literacy skills.
5. Implement effective demonstrations, explanations, and instructional cues and prompts to link concepts to appropriate learning experiences.

Participants

A total of 29 students were enrolled in the course at the time of the study; 9 were health and physical

[B]y reading YA novels in a health education class, students may learn more about a given health issue . . . they may learn how people are affected physically, psychologically, emotionally, and socially.

education majors, 5 were education majors, 11 were liberal studies majors, 3 were rehabilitation science majors, and 1 was a chemistry major. Students reported no previous experience with book clubs at the university. Several students, however, discussed taking part in book clubs in a high school literature class.

Text Selection and Participant Grouping

The adolescent literature instructor selected in advance the novels and memoirs book club members could choose to read (please see Appendix A on p. 76 for these selections and other suggested titles). The literary works were chosen based upon topic relevance, timeliness, the popularity of the author/books among adolescents, and the quality of the writing. To create the various groups, books were displayed, and the instructor book-talked the choices, providing a verbal description of each and sharing information about the author, genre, health issue, and a brief plot summary (without spoilers). Topics included teenage pregnancy, steroid use among teen athletes, family illness, substance abuse, sports-related concussion, developmental disabilities, eating disorders, and body image. Students were invited to look through the books and read the back cover synopses and a few passages to explore the author's writing style. They then recorded their top three preferences; groups were formed based on these preferences and a desire for heterogeneous groups based on gender, student academic performance, and field of major.

Procedures, Data Sources, and Analyses

Once groups were formed, students in each book club met. The first meeting included an introductory activity to help ensure that group members would become comfortable in sharing their viewpoints and opinions. Students participated in getting-to-know-you activities that included making a first-name sign where each letter of the name told something about themselves (Roessing, 2012). They also completed and shared simple charts delineating "Favorites" such as favorite books, movies, foods, & restaurants. After participating in these introductory activities, students recorded information about their health issue of interest on a "What I Know and Want to Know" chart. At that point, they were more apt to begin conversing on the topic of their book club in a natural discussion. This opening session also included the mapping of their

reading schedule for the following three weeks, distribution of the journaling pages, and instructions for completing the response journals.

As a departure from traditional book clubs, individual students exploring the same topic in our book clubs sometimes read different novels and compared and contrasted the treatment of their health-related topics across titles with other members of their group. For example, some members of the book club focusing on steroid use read *Boost*, while others read *Gym Candy*. Within the group focused on teen pregnancy, each of the three participants read a different novel. Additionally, book clubs reading novels about eating disorders met together to compare how their protagonists handled the issues of body image and eating disorders.

Rather than assigning students roles, such as Discussion Leader, Visualizer, Connector, Vocabulary Evaluator, and Question Asker, as originally defined by Harvey Daniels (2002), students were given two-sided, double-entry journal pages (see Figs. 1a-c) specifically designed for this project and adapted from *No More "Us" and "Them": Classroom Lessons and Activities to Promote Peer Respect* (Roessing, 2012). Students completed the journal entries as they read their novels, allowing them to record textual evidence and their corresponding responses to and reflections on text, plot, setting, and characterizations, demonstrating to the other book club members and the instructor what they thought was important in the text. More important, the journals provided discussion points to share with the group, increasing collaboration in the study of health issues. Book club members met once a week for approximately 30 minutes to discuss the chapters that were read during the previous week.

After the final reading and text discussion meeting, groups were asked to research the health issue addressed in their books, including descriptions and effects of the issues (definition, symptoms/effects, recommendations for prevention and/or treatment), current research being conducted, current statistics, and teaching and learning considerations for teachers of students experiencing this issue. Students also related their research to the YA title read. Each book club developed an annotated bibliography of references (one book, three journal articles, and two websites), and each member read and reflected upon a selected contribution to a peer-reviewed journal. Finally, each group gave a 15-minute presentation of its health issue

research and related YA novel to the class. Creativity in presentations was encouraged with suggestions to present a documentary or mocumentary, infomercial, poster, talk show, skit, or combination of methods/formats. A grading rubric was distributed to the students prior to the presentation (please see Appendix B on p. 77 for a sample project point-distribution rubric).

Following the presentations, students completed a survey for the purpose of gaining insight into their experience with the book club. Survey questions were designed by the researchers to elicit reflection from the participants and provide feedback for the faculty involved. Survey questions included:

- What were the advantages, if any, of reading a young adult book about your topic?
- What insights did reading a novel about your health issue give you that the research did not?
- What were the advantages, if any, academic or other, of reading and discussing as part of a book club?
- How did the double-entry journaling sheets assist you in journaling about the book and in your book club discussions?
- How were the group dynamics in novel discussions? In conducting research? In planning and presenting your in-class presentation?
- How did you choose to present your issue/novel/research to your peers? How did you select your presentation format? What was the planning process? How effective was your presentation? If you were to make another presentation, what might you change to increase effectiveness and audience engagement?
- In your future profession, will you use the book club as a teaching/learning methodology?
- What did you take away from participating in this project?

Completed surveys were analyzed to reveal recurring themes and their relationship to reviewed literature. Surveys were initially reviewed individually by the researchers and then reviewed collaboratively to substantiate outcomes.

Findings

The surveys generated critical and positive feedback from the students. Through the reading of the novels,

the journaling, and the authentic discussions, students reported that the practice encouraged them to critically consider and research health issues, thinking more deeply as they worked together within their book clubs and, at times, among clubs.

Ninety-three percent of students reported that reading young adult literature provided a better understanding of the selected health issue. Twenty of the twenty-seven students noted that the literature provided the perspective of a young adult and gave insight into how young adults may view and deal with the issue. With specific regard to the context of a health class, 37% of students described this methodology as breaking the norm of solely conducting research and providing a fresh take on investigating an issue.

Seventy percent of students wrote that reading YA literature on the health issue brought greater realism to the issue—a personal perspective and story that extended beyond facts, data, and statistics; consequently, students reported having made a personal connection with the issue. In other words, reading YA literature increased empathy. One student wrote, “I felt how she [the protagonist] felt.”

Comprehensiveness and detail of the journal entries varied among students; however, 70% of students reported that the journaling exercise helped them to record key concepts, organize personal thoughts, give a better understanding of the issue and experience, and increase accountability to the group. One student recorded, “I would actually think more in depth about what I read so that I could analyze the book more wisely.”

Over half of students reported that all group members contributed during the discussions, and students noted that the discussions increased their knowledge, understanding, and interest. They felt that discussion of the YA titles opened the opportunity to share and discuss personal interpretations and experiences. Being exposed to different points of view reportedly

Through the reading of the novels, the journaling, and the authentic discussions, students reported that the practice encouraged them to critically consider and research health issues.

resulted in improved comprehension and learning. One student wrote, “It helps to open your mind to thinking in different ways.” Another wrote, “The discussion gave me other ideas; my group members made points I had not thought about.” Students reported that the journaling helped to keep the discussions on track and enhanced the discussions.

There was no evidence noted through presentations and discussions that the YA literature perpetuated stereotypes or misconceptions about health issues. There was also no misrepresentation of health content noted during the presentations, which may have been the result of students cross-referencing the health issues with academic resources.

Eighty-one percent of students reported that the methodology promoted not only collaboration and teamwork, but also fostered the development of communication skills. One wrote, “I gained a new technique for teaching and learning in health education. This methodology provides an opportunity to learn health in a more interesting fashion.” Upon conclusion of the presentations, one student said that she so enjoyed the assignment that she started a book club experience with her family.

Discussion and Implications

An intention of this project was to assess student response to book clubs as a teaching and learning methodology in a university health education course. Students’ responses to the assignment were positive, and they considered this approach to be a dynamic method in which to study health education issues.

The book club approach was a new instructional method for the health educator; she met with some initial resistance from students who complained that the process included “having to read a book.” However, by the second book club meeting in class, students were demonstrating their commitment to the assignment by journaling and discussing their readings and developing a relationship with the characters in each of their books. The methodology was engaging students on multiple levels—academically, emotionally, socially. The interaction was dynamic and brought greater meaning to the health issues being studied.

Book clubs have been linked to valued outcomes, including helping students reach a clearer understanding of themselves and others as well as fostering inquiry through collaborative learning in small

student-centered discussion groups that encourage higher-order thinking (Stringer & Reilly, 2004). According to Nigro (2011), engaging in accountable talk, group discussion, paraphrasing, and summarizing helps students develop their critical thinking skills. These discussions help students reframe their thinking and increase their understanding through constructive exchanges as a group; this interaction can further students’ understanding of subject matter, especially through facilitated discussion, which increases the potential for improved written and artistic responses (Nigro, 2011). These findings corroborate the university students’ responses to the book club practice.

Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are reciprocally reinforced through book club group work; in fact, book clubs connect all aspects of literacy for students with varied interests and levels of reading achievement (Anderson & Corbett, 2008). Benefits of book clubs that have been identified include stronger connections between texts and personal experiences, improved classroom climates, enhanced degrees of gender equity and understanding, and a learning environment more conducive to the needs and abilities of English language learners (Chase & Pheifer, n.d.). Stringer and Reilly (2004) write that collaborative reading experiences, such as book clubs, reinforce cooperation and empathy among the students and cultivate further interest in reading.

The outcomes of this study support many of these findings. Students reported that the experience provided greater realism to each health issue being investigated, offering a personal connection to the characters. Students noted that these personal connections increased their feelings of empathy in far greater ways than would the reading of descriptions and statistical reports of health issues. Students also reported appreciation for the collaborative, engaging, and dynamic methodology, which contributed to a positive and productive learning environment. In efforts to improve effectiveness, content area teachers must become aware of instructional approaches and strategies that can be used within their existing curricula to help improve the literacy levels of their struggling readers (National Institute for Literacy, 2007). In order to encourage students to think critically, they need to be provided with opportunities for cognitive and affective responses to literature; book clubs provide one instructional method for accomplishing this goal (Chase and Pheifer, n.d.). As part

of balanced literacy instruction, book clubs have the potential to rejuvenate excitement about teaching and invoke enthusiasm for reading and discussing among students (Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, & Miller, 2010) across all disciplines.

The health education majors involved in this assignment discovered many reasons to implement this methodology in their future classrooms, both as student teachers and as professional teachers:

- The advantages of implementing book clubs in the classroom (increasing student engagement and motivation, collaboration, peer support, and development of social skills).
- The benefits of using young adult literature (to study and add personal dimension to issues, to supplement the textbook, to provide differentiation of reading levels, and to raise interest and awareness about health issues).
- The potential for increased reading comprehension skills among readers through the use of journaling and text reformulation (post-reading class presentations) (Roessing, 2009).
- An understanding of how to conduct supplementary research that is purposeful for an audience.

Students may be guided toward greater autonomy in and accountability for their own education if educators provide them with valuable, engaging, and relevant assignments to accomplish through collaboration with peers. Additionally, this collaboration between faculty members has led to the co-teaching of Health Education Curriculum and Methods, where traditional delivery of course content will be blended with the further use of YA book clubs as an introduction to reading and writing across the curriculum.

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Activities to Promote Peer Respect (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012); *Comma Quest: The Rules They Followed—The Sentences They Saved* (Discover Writing, 2013); and *Bridging the Gap: Reading Critically and Writing Meaningfully to Get to the Core* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). Ms. Roessing serves as Editor of *Connections*, the journal of the Georgia Council of Teachers of English.

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Appendix A: YA Fiction and Memoir Related to Health Education

[*Denotes titles chosen for the book club project in the health issues course. The two Trueman books were read by one club.]

Topic: Body Image; Eating Disorder

Anderson, L. H.	<i>Wintergirls</i> (2010, Speak)
Apostolides, M.	<i>Inner Hunger: A Young Woman's Struggle through Anorexia and Bulimia</i> (1998, Norton)
Blume, J.	<i>Blubber</i> (2014, Atheneum Books for Young Readers)
Brande, R.	<i>Fat Cat</i> (2011, Ember)
Crutcher, C.	<i>Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes</i> (2003, Greenwillow)
*Friend, N.	<i>Perfect: A Novel</i> (2004, Milkweed)
*Gotlieb, L.	<i>Stick Figure: A Diary of My Former Self</i> (2001, Berkley)
Hautzig, D.	<i>Second Star to the Right</i> (1999, Puffin)
Krasnow, M.	<i>My Life as a Male Anorexic</i> (1996, Routledge)
*Wheatley, S.	<i>'Till the Fat Girl Sings: From an Overweight Nobody to a Broadway Somebody—A Memoir</i> (2006, Adams Media)

Topic: Disability; Illness

Arrick, F.	<i>What You Don't Know Can Kill You [HIV/AIDS]</i> (1994, Laurel-Leaf)
Blume, J.	<i>Deenie</i> [birth defects] (2010, Delacourt)
Ferris, J.	<i>Invincible Summer</i> [cancer] (1994, Farrar, Straus & Giroux)
Foley, J.	<i>Falling in Love Is No Snap</i> [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder] (1986, Delacorte Books for Young Readers)
Green, J.	<i>The Fault in Our Stars</i> [cancer] (2014, Speak)
Hurwin, D.	<i>A Time for Dancing: A Novel</i> [cancer] (2009, Little, Brown Books for Young Readers)
Kingley, J., & Levitz, M.	<i>Count Us In: Growing Up with Down Syndrome</i> (2007, Mariner)
Klein, N.	<i>Going Backwards</i> [Alzheimer's] (1987, Scholastic)
McDaniel, L.	<i>All the Days of Her Life</i> [diabetes] (1994, Laurel-Leaf)
Philbrick, R.	<i>Freak the Mighty</i> [disability] (2001, Scholastic)
*Sonnenblick, J.	<i>Drums, Girls, and Dangerous Pie</i> [family illness] (2006, Scholastic)
*Trueman, T.	<i>Cruise Control</i> [mental illness] (2005, Harper Teen)
*Trueman, T.	<i>Stuck in Neutral</i> [cerebral palsy] (2000, Harper Teen)
Voigt, C.	<i>Izzy, Willy-Nilly</i> [disability] (2005, Simon Pulse)

Topic: Sports Concussion

*Korman, G.	<i>Pop</i> (2009, Balzer + Bray)
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Topic: Steroid Use

*Deuker, C.	<i>Gym Candy</i> (2007, Gym Candy)
*Mackel, K.	<i>Boost</i> (2008, Dial)
McKissack Jr., F.	<i>Shooting Star</i> (2010, Atheneum Books for Young Readers)

Topic: Substance Use; Addiction

*Anonymous	<i>Go Ask Alice</i> [substance abuse] (2005, Simon Pulse)
Anonymous	<i>Jay's Journal</i> [substance abuse] (2010, Simon Pulse)
Anonymous	<i>Lucy in the Sky</i> [substance abuse] (2012, Simon Pulse)
Cadnum, M.	<i>Calling Home</i> [alcoholism] (1991, Viking Juvenile)
Cheripko, J.	<i>Imitate the Tiger</i> [alcoholism] (1998, Boyds Mills Press)
Gelb, A.	<i>Real Life: My Best Friend Died</i> [alcoholism] (1995, Simon Pulse)
Hopkins, E.	<i>Crank</i> [substance abuse] (2013, Margaret K. McElderry Books)
Hopkins, E.	<i>Glass</i> [substance abuse] (2013, Margaret K. McElderry Books)
Woodson, J.	<i>Beneath a Meth Moon</i> [substance abuse] (2013, Speak)

Topic: Teen Pregnancy

Efaw, A.	<i>After</i> (2010, Speak)
Johnson, A.	<i>The First Part Last</i> (2010, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers)
*Sparks, B.	<i>Annie's Baby: The Diary of Anonymous, a Pregnant Teenager</i> (1998, Avon)

Appendix B: Sample Project Point-Distribution Rubric

____/40 points: Novel Overview: author, title, character(s), setting, plot elements

____/40 points: Research Overview:

- health issue description, symptoms/effects, impact on self/family/friends
- recommendations for prevention and treatment
- current statistics
- considerations for teachers of students experiencing this issue
- annotated bibliography of references (one book, three peer-reviewed journal articles, two Web sources) typed in APA format

____/10 points: Public Speaking Skills: volume, clarity, eye contact, pacing, natural gestures

____/10 points: Creative Appropriate Format: i.e., documentary, mocumentary, public service announcement

The Book Battle:

Using Service Learning to Collaborate with a Young Adult Library

The library, lit and buzzing with activity well after the rest of the school is closed, suddenly stands in tense silence. Groups of students huddle around tables decorated with paper bags containing handwritten team names: #bookswag; Page 394; The Fellowship; Order of the Phoenix. Every pair of eyes is trained on the host who, dressed as The Hunger Games’s Caesar Flickerman, stands at a podium in the front of the room about to read the next question. “Name, in order, the seven Defense against the Dark Arts teachers in the Harry Potter series.” A burst of activity ensues as teammates whisper back and forth, careful not to be overheard but very aware of the 45-second time limit. Amidst sounds of shushing and frantic scribbling, scraps of folded paper are handed hastily to proctors, also dressed as characters from The Hunger Games. The answers are brought to the front of the room, and students wait anxiously to hear the correct answer, crossing fingers and clasping hands. Only one team, comprised of sixth-grade boys sitting in the far back of the fray, manages all seven in order. The boys cheer, while their competitors groan. The noises slowly quiet as the scores are updated and the next question is cued up, and once again the library is quiet; all eyes are on the host.

This opening vignette describes our most recent Book Battle, a trivia contest in which contestants answer questions based on popular young adult fiction. This culminating event is part of a service-learning partnership that brings together teen readers, students enrolled in a university young adult literature course, a library’s outreach program, and preservice teach-

ers engaged in field experiences. For this issue of *The ALAN Review*, editors Glenn, Ginsberg, and King (2015) encouraged authors “to share collaborative efforts involving students, colleagues, and communities in creating spaces for YA literature to flourish.” Coauthored by a team of four authors (an English educator; a middle/high school librarian; a former preservice teacher, now middle school teacher; and a high school student), the purpose of this article is to explore what happened when university students enrolled in a young adult literature course provided service in a location intimately connected with what young adults are reading—the school library. What we found is that each shareholder benefitted in different ways from the experience, thus contributing to our philosophy of the power of young adult literature to foster a community of readers.

To broaden the study of young adult literature (YAL) beyond the bounds of the English language arts (ELA) classroom, undergraduates enrolled in Jackie’s YAL course organized and hosted a book-themed trivia competition at the middle/high school library of the university’s laboratory school (Lab School). The competition, called the Book Battle, is a contest in which teams of up to six teen readers compete to answer trivia questions about popular books. The Lab School has a strong community of readers, with students in grades 6–12 who were thrilled to have the chance to show off their knowledge of favorite book series.

For the first two years of this partnership, all Lab School students in grades 6–12 were invited to

participate in the Book Battle. Undergraduate university students enrolled in a YAL course handled the logistics: planning and hosting the event; making promotional visits to the ELA classrooms at the Lab School; composing questions on each book series; creating a slide show of those questions for display during the Battle; decorating the school library; dressing up as literary characters; reading questions and tallying correct answers; and providing refreshments and prizes for the winning teams. By year three, 2014, Lab School students, many of whom attended the first Book Battle, ran the event.

In the first part of this article, we consider the philosophical and practical implications of service learning. The next four sections contain reflections on the course, each written by a constituent in the service learning partnership. We conclude with ideas of how to replicate this experience in readers' own communities.

Service Learning and the Young Adult Literature Course

While *The ALAN Review* has published several articles that highlight powerful collaborative partnerships, such as Bauer's work in a juvenile detention center (2011), we have yet to read one that employs service learning as a way to organize a YAL course. Our understanding of a service-learning course is guided by Bringle and Hatcher's (1995) definition:

A course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and b) reflect on the service activity in such a way to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 112)

Service learning brings students into the field (Ostrow, 2004) and, in the case of preservice teachers, often challenges their notions of middle and high school students (Hallman & Burdick, 2011). At the heart of service learning is the meeting of all parties' needs and interests: the students' learning and application of course content, the community partner's programming, and the instructor's objectives for the course.

Two recently published books that bring service learning into direct contact with the work being done in literacy education can serve as guides for those of us in the field of young adult literature. In *The Activist Learner*, Wilhelm, Douglas, and Fry (2014) argue that

service learning can bring about change; they provide valuable insight into the benefits of service learning for the field of literacy. In *Service Learning in Literacy Education*, Kinloch and Smagorinsky (2014) bring together a group of literacy educators whose members share their service-learning programs and how those partnerships further their courses' literacy goals. The contributors' pieces are guided by the notion that service learning involves a reciprocal relationship in which all partners benefit through building and sustaining partnerships and through frequent and ongoing reflection. Both of these texts were useful to us in composing this article as they enabled us to articulate how we built and sustained our relationship and how our approaches support the work in literacy education. In the next four sections, we each share our changing roles with the Book Battle and reflect on the challenges, tensions, and rewards we encountered over the years.

At the heart of service learning is the meeting of all parties' needs and interests: the students' learning and application of course content, the community partner's programming, and the instructor's objectives for the course.

The University Partner

"So it's you and a syringe against the Capitol? See, this is why no one lets you make the plans." (Haymitch from Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, 2008, p. 382)

I (Jackie) teach a YAL course at a land-grant university located in the state capital with approximately 30,000 undergraduate and graduate students. When I teach the course, it is cross-listed in the English department and the Education department, indicating to students that the course will contain a balance between pedagogy and content. Any undergraduate is eligible to take the course, and I often have students from Business, Psychology, and Foreign Language sitting among English majors and those seeking teacher certification. The course is mandatory for teacher certification in English Education, and about 60% of my students are enrolled in that program.

All of my students at times generalize the adolescent reader—either assuming all readers want to read what they wanted to read as teenagers or basing their knowledge of contemporary trends in young adult literature on whatever is currently popular (which changes from year to year). Reading their responses to course assignments reveals some very broad assumptions: students don't read; the young adult section of a library or bookstore holds nothing of interest; canonical texts like Shakespeare's *King Lear* can be considered young adult literature if kids choose to read them on their own. I cannot speak for the contemporary adolescent reader, which is why I sometimes identify with Katniss: it's me, with a syringe against a room full of students who do not really know what contemporary teenagers like to read. I needed a Haymitch, a mentor, to help me make our course objectives relevant and applicable.

Our university offers a service-learning scholar's program for faculty interested in service learning. I participated with hopes of constructing learning experiences that would put my university students in the field. When I was preparing my application for the program, I thought I would place the students in my YAL course with classroom English language arts teachers who had strong independent reading programs. After beginning my service-learning program, I realized that there were many more potential partners in addition to middle and high school English language arts teachers who could help meet the varied interests and needs of my students.



Since not all the university students who are enrolled in my course are necessarily interested in the pedagogical implications of YAL, finding a service-learning placement that was not strictly confined to a classroom environment became important to me. Because my primary objective in this course was for students to interact with and learn about the contemporary young adult reader, I thought of the relationships I had built with school librarians. A placement in a school library appealed to me because I felt the less restrictive, more informal setting would provide a way for my students to actually interact with readers. I reached out to our Lab School's middle/high school librarian with a request, and she agreed to be one of my first community partners.

For my course, the service-learning component is mandatory, and I do my best to make sure that the nature of the placement provides multiple ways for students to be involved. For example, one student who may have a conflict during the hours a group plans to meet might be put in charge of publicity and work when his or her schedule allows. The service-learning component counts as 30% of the course grade and requires students to spend at least 10 hours in the placement site (please see Figure 1 for an excerpt from my course syllabus). All partners (the student, the librarian, and me as the instructor) must sign a contract outlining our rights and responsibilities as members of the partnership. Service-learning events resulting from this work have included the creation of digital book trailers for the state's Teen Readers' Choice Award, facilitation of book clubs, creation of displays on particular themes, and surveys and interviews involving library patrons. But the Book Battle, which I was introduced to through a partnership with a librarian at a local public library, is my favorite.

This partnership with librarians has enabled me to put my students in contact with adolescents who read young adult literature. Who better than the readers themselves to share the current and lasting trends in young adult literature? While my students and I may think we know what "the kids are reading," we may not know how they talk about what they are reading. Service-learning partnerships like this one fulfill my desire to create an educational experience that meets my students' diverse needs and interests (Sulentic-Dowell & Bach, 2012), but because of our department's teaching needs, I am only allowed to

Course Syllabus Excerpt

Service Learning

This section is a service-learning (SL) course. You will work in two teams with Young Adult Services librarians from two local libraries to assist them with adolescent programming, including, but not limited to, facilitating book clubs, assisting with promotions, and creating displays. Each team will work with that librarian to identify his or her needs and complete a semester-long project that meets those needs (10-hour minimum). This service should assist you in understanding and applying course content in a context with real adolescent readers in a way that hypothetical classroom discussions might not be able to replicate. I will provide you with the contact information for these libraries.

Service-Learning Components (30%)

The service-learning component of this course requires at least 10 hours in the field. In order to receive credit for this course, you must sign in at the site and fill in the attached field log form.

Reflective assignments for the service-learning component: You will turn in a portfolio with a signed copy of your SL contract, the following assessment pieces, and a log sheet signed by your librarian verifying the dates and times you worked in the library on the project.

1. *Examination of a young adult reader and his/her relationship to the library*—Describe and evaluate the library where you have been placed. Then, create enough questions for a 20-minute interview about reading habits and library use with a young adult reader from your library. Write a summary of that experience, including how this experience made you think about your service-learning project. (750-word essay)
2. *SL-project plan*—Describe what your project will be and what you think the obstacles and benefits will be. Make an action plan that outlines the roles and responsibilities for each group member.
3. *Additional reading*—As a group, read at least five additional texts in order to help you with this SL project. Then, write a list of those titles with an explanation of why you chose them, how they helped you with your project, and what you thought about them.
4. *Project reflection*—For this final assignment, reflect on what you have learned during this service-learning experience. Address the following questions: Has your idea of the adolescent reader changed? Why or why not? What have you learned about young adult libraries and librarians? Describe and reflect on one particular experience during your SL project and tell how that experience helped you understand some aspect of this course's content that might not have been possible without your placement.
5. Copy of *sign-in sheet* indicating your 10 hours in the field.

Figure 1. Service-learning excerpt from course syllabus

teach this course occasionally. When I was no longer able to teach the course, I became worried about how to sustain what had turned into a successful annual event for all of the involved partners. My syringe was not going to be enough.

Community Partner

“Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light.”
(Albus Dumbledore from J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, film version only, 2004)

In a time of schooling filled with debate about national education standards and a seemingly single-minded focus on testing and accountability, it can

sometimes be hard to find the fun in education. One of my (Charity’s) favorite aspects of school librarianship is the opportunity to find this fun by focusing on and nurturing the joy of leisure reading. At the Lab School, I am the middle and high school librarian; I serve approximately 750 students in grades 6–12. Our library draws a strong contingent of avid and enthusiastic readers, and a large part of our mission is to create a sense of community around books and reading. In the past, we have hosted a number of programs, such as a sorting ceremony for our school’s Quidditch team, a movie release party for *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), monthly book clubs for both middle and high school students, and family book discussion evenings, all designed to bring students together in

celebration of literature. When Jackie approached me about partnering with her undergraduate young adult literature course, I was thrilled about the prospect of bringing another special event to our library program. Capitalizing on our students' encyclopedic knowledge

The Book Battle gave these enthusiastic teen readers a space to get together and celebrate books and reading, an occasion where their knowledge was valued.

of their favorite book series (and their love of showing off that expertise), we decided that a Book Battle would be just the thing to create a sense of healthy book-themed competition.

The first task for all of us involved in planning the Battle was to decide which books would be included. For our first event, we selected series we knew were popular with teen readers at our school [Harry Pot-

ter (Rowling, 1997–2007); *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954–1955/2012); *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008–2010); *Percy Jackson* (Riordan, 2005–2009); and *Artemis Fowl* (Colfer, 2001–2012)], while our subsequent annual events allowed the teens to vote on the series to be included in the Battle. Teens voted back several series for a second year of inclusion—Harry Potter, *Percy Jackson*, *The Hunger Games*—and added the *Unwind* dystology (Shusterman, 2007–2014) and the *Divergent* trilogy (Roth, 2011–2013). In year three, I invited a team of high school students who had participated as competitors in previous years to be the planners of the Book Battle, with middle schoolers as the contestants. Therefore, the book series included in year three had a more middle-school focus; Harry Potter made it back (of course!) and was joined by Michael Vey (Evans, 2011–2014), *The Shadow Children* (Haddix, 1998–2006), the *Divergent* trilogy (Roth, 2011–2013), *The Maze Runner* (Dashner, 2009–2011), and *The Lorien Legacies* (Lore, 2010–2014).

While the teams of YAL undergrads and high school students planned and organized the Book Battles on their end, I worked with my middle and high school students and teachers to drum up excitement about the event in our school. Sign-up forms were placed in the library, where I could help match up those who wanted to participate to form teams of 5 to 6 students. As the goal for each team was to

have at least one expert on each of the included book series, team creation was an important component of success.

Unfortunately for our dedicated team of high school planners in the most recent Battle, I also got in their way on one occasion. In the spirit of efficiency, I like to create contact lists in my email for groups like the Book Battle Planning Committee, the Middle School Book Club, and the High School Book Club. As the Book Battle drew near, planning team members emailed their lists of questions to me for compilation into a single document and for review at our final organizational meeting. Working too quickly one day, I sent out that compiled list—with answers!—not to the Planning Committee, but to the Middle School Book Club, the very people who would be the competitors. Oops! Like the dedicated people they are, the planners took it in stride and made up some new questions, but I'm not sure I forgave myself as quickly as they forgave me.

On the evening of the event, the participants showed up ready for battle, with some even dressed in costume as their favorite book characters. The Book Battle gave these enthusiastic teen readers a space to get together and celebrate books and reading, an occasion where their knowledge was valued. The excitement of competing over the books they love and have read time and again highlighted the joys of leisure reading for these young adults, and the annual event continues to strengthen the community of readers that is the cornerstone of our school library program. The partnership with university service-learning students in earlier Battles helped prepare our high school students to take a leadership role as the event evolved. Having these capable teams in charge of the event each year makes my participation in the Book Battle—while not completely stress-free—a much more enjoyable task than the pressure of single-handed planning would allow.

The University Student Partner

“There is nothing like looking, if you want to find something. You certainly usually find something, if you look, but it is not always quite the something you were after.” (J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 1937/2012, p. 69)

I (Jay) have had the absolute privilege to participate in and help run two Book Battles at the Lab

School. As a college student studying YAL in my first Battle and a graduate student becoming a teacher in the second year, I had a unique chance to learn about students and test my hand in the field of education. For two years, I was able to create questions and facilitate a celebration of learning. I went into the Book Battle with a purpose that may have been quite different from that of my counterparts, and I came away feeling a little like Bilbo in that what I found was not quite what I was looking for. That purpose was to observe students. As a future teacher, I wanted to see the reality of how students could feel about literature. I wanted to know what I was getting myself into, and I wanted to see if there was anything I could take away with me to my own classroom.

Through this experience, I have learned many things that I have kept in mind while entering the field of education. Foremost would be the importance of planning. I was lucky to be given the opportunity to participate in this event twice, and there was a stark difference between the experiences. My first time participating in the Book Battle was through the completion of a service-learning project for my class. As one might expect from stereotypical college students, we did not put a lot of thought into the matter. As such, we were still unsure of how to proceed on the night of the Battle. We made it through, but it was a nerve-racking experience that did not meet the potential for effectiveness. With that in mind, I approached my second year with a more thoughtful attitude. I made sure that my team did not slack on the planning, and as a result, the competition ran much more smoothly, and I was able to enjoy it that much more.

Now, it would do injustice to my experience to say that I enjoyed the Book Battles. I simply loved my time with the students. I was truly jubilant about the fact that, despite what some may think, there are students who still truly love and appreciate books. Remember, the Book Battle is not a mandatory event; rather, it is an optional night that requires students to give up their own time to attend. Both years, I was stunned (and very pleased) by the turnout. Students of multiple ages came out to show off their book knowledge. Each and every one of those students came in with such enthusiasm and pure love for books that it was hard to maintain a dry eye. These Battles taught me that as long as there are students with this passion, I'll always want to teach.

The second time around, I felt there was only one true challenge—the creation of better questions that could not be easily contested or misconstrued. However, we met that challenge more easily than I could have imagined. The group of graduate students I worked with formed a PLC (professional learning community) and delegated the work among ourselves. We made sure not only to prepare our own work but to provide questions on the work of others. This turned out to be incredibly effective as we were able to spot problems before they arose. Rather than dealing with an issue during the Battle, we were able to work it out ahead of time. Learning the importance of collaboration has certainly carried into my professional work.

All in all, I was honored to be a part of what I hope will always be a Lab School tradition. Participation in the Book Battle is not only a powerful learning tool for college students, but a wonderful celebration of knowledge for its participants. I will never forget the skills that I, myself, have learned because of this event, and I will always cherish the joy that was found.

The Book Battle gives students who love reading an opportunity to share and celebrate their knowledge and provides the same feelings of competition and recognition that are usually confined to athletic events.

The High School Partner

“We decided . . . we’d give it another try.” (Annabeth from Rick Riordan’s *The Lightning Thief*, 2005, p. 374)

The Lab School is home to a community of enthusiastic young readers. Sadly, while there is no shortage of athletic activities and clubs available for middle and high school students, it is rare to see activities geared specifically toward these young readers. Thus, events like the Book Battle become important. Students with a passion for reading look forward to the Book Battle as an opportunity to celebrate and discuss popular books in a community setting, a rare experience outside of classrooms and the odd book club. However, there are also plenty of students at the Lab School who do not read recreationally. Many of



these students rarely discuss books outside of class, let alone find books they genuinely enjoy. In light of this, one of the main ideas behind the Book Battle was bringing together students from a wide range of ages and interest levels and getting them invested in a group of books known to be well liked among young adults. By adding a competitive aspect to popular literature and testing the students' comprehension rather than reading speed, the event encourages students to experience new books and to discuss them with their friends and teammates. The Book Battle gives students who love reading an opportunity to share and celebrate their knowledge and provides the same feelings of competition and recognition that are usually confined to athletic events.

Being a student at the Lab School, I (Kylie) have had the privilege to be both a participant and organizer of the Book Battle. As participants, my friends and I used to prepare weeks in advance for the Book Battle. We each specialized in a book or two that we found interesting, then met at lunch to talk about possible questions and interpretations. Two years after our first Book Battle, Charity approached a few of us who had been part of the original group and were now in high school. She asked if we wanted to take a turn running the event. Like Annabeth in *The Lightning Thief* (Riordan, 2005), I decided to "give it another try."

Being involved with the organization of the Book Battle was a remarkably similar experience. While most students had additional duties like advertising or hosting, every student involved in the planning of the Book Battle had to read one or more books and come

up with questions of varying difficulty. In the process of screening potential questions, we put as much thought and discussion into the selected books as the students who would be competing. This was especially obvious when I talked to my younger brother Michael, an eighth grader who was competing in the same Book Battle I was organizing. He was reading *Divergent* (Roth, 2011) for his team at the same time that I was writing the questions for a later book in the same series, *Allegiant* (Roth, 2013). Michael would often ask similar questions to the ones I came up with and sought me out to discuss characters or plot developments that had him confused. It was clear through the parallels between the experience of hosting and competing in the Book Battle that the basic roles of an organizer and competitor are essentially the same: read and ponder a good book. Having filled both roles has given me the perspective to say that regardless of one's part in the competition, being involved in a community of passionate readers inevitably leads to thought-provoking discussion.

The true value of the Book Battle lies in cultivating a love of reading. The Book Battle brings in students who read through most of their free time, students who happen to love a certain series, and even students who simply love a good competition. The Book Battle is therefore able to reach across age groups and interest levels and essentially create one massive conversation about a select group of popular books. This environment cultivates and celebrates a love of reading, evidenced in part by the teams that return every year to compete. It is truly incredible to watch college students, teachers, librarians, and students ranging from middle school to high school all come together to enjoy and discuss popular books. This sense of community is what makes the Book Battle such a unique experience for everyone involved and what fosters a sense of genuine excitement in readers of every age.

Reflections and Recommendations

We've explained our journey with service learning, one we still adjust every year. Like the arenas in the Hunger Games series, our landscapes and participants continually change. To generate this next section, the four of us sat down and discussed the past three Book Battles; we engaged in the reflective work that is at

the center of service learning and asked each other the question, “How do we know if the event has been a success?” We realized that that was a question that brought us to an even more important question, “Did each partner benefit from the collaboration?”

We believe we did, as each partner was able to interact with a world outside of his/her own. As Wilhelm, Douglas, and Fry (2014) note, “The service learning process should result in some kind of contribution to ongoing disciplinary and real-world conversations and activity about how to make meaning, apply learning, and be in the world” (p. 4). For Jay, that world contained students outside of the English language arts classroom. For Jackie, it was the library and learning more about how young adult literature and its readers function in that space. For Kylie, it was an apprenticeship of sorts as the group of high school students planned, publicized, and ran the event. And, for Charity, the event became a staple of her annual programming. Furthermore, this experience extended beyond partners’ needs and encouraged and valued the enthusiasm teenagers have for reading. We all agree that the point of the Book Battle is to encourage an approach to reading that might be different from an “academic approach.” Purposeful, enthusiastic returns to well-known narratives can foster deeper understandings and engagement with books. Another one of our goals is to remind students of the pleasure of leisure reading and the escape into a book.

Setting up and completing a successful service-learning partnership can be challenging, and we hope that Figures 2 and 3 will help others understand the need for timelines, clear communication systems, and a responsible accountability system. All parties involved in the Book Battle experienced some initial tensions that accompanied meeting someone for the first time, engaging in course assignments in spaces other than the classroom, and working in groups. There were also simple details to pay attention to—from sending respectful, professional emails to showing up on time prepared to contribute. We mitigated these tensions by reminding all parties involved to return to the spirit of service learning, which we discussed at our first meetings in the classroom and in the library. As Kinloch and Smagorinsky (2014) and Wilhelm, Douglas, and Fry (2014) remind us, the tenets of service learning include benefitting all involved, taking

the time for frequent reflection, and acknowledging the possibility for change.

Despite the success of our efforts, we continue to have several concerns for the future. The first involves how partners decide to sustain or let go of one another, especially when the partnership is so successful. When I (Jackie)

created my first service-learning course, I worked with four different community partners to give my students the opportunity to see teenagers in diverse settings and discuss those experiences in class with each other. As an instructor, I found working with four placements to be too demanding. In the end, I narrowed the placements from four to two. Then the problem became that my department needed me to cover courses essential to the program, and I would

no longer be allowed to teach the Young Adult Literature course. I worried about how to sustain the successful events without a ready-made set of university students. The second year, we managed through the use of student volunteers who came on their own time to make arrangements. And the third year, we were able to shift responsibility to the high school students.

Jay is now a middle school teacher and has been thinking about how he can bring this excitement for reading into his classroom. He has found that certain elements from the Book Battle structure can enliven his classroom, such as the ongoing teamwork and rivalry (for example, team #bookswag came back the next year as #bookswag 2.0 and the next as #bookswag 3.0), the informal environment, the appealing popular literature, and the ways in which enthusiastic engagement with YA books can support the development of higher-level analysis and deep reading skills.

Finally, Charity wonders how to keep the event fresh. The challenge to renew and revive is where the students, both at the secondary and university levels, come in. They continually provide several ideas on

All parties involved in the Book Battle experienced some initial tensions that accompanied meeting someone for the first time, engaging in course assignments in spaces other than the classroom, and working in groups.

Partner	Activity	When to Accomplish It
University partner	Find out your university's policy and support for service-learning courses. Get your course designated as a service-learning course, if you can, and advertise it as such.	The semester before the course is offered
University partner, Community partner	Discuss details (ideas for projects and important information for university and community partner students), and allow time to gather resources. There are probably several small grants available to support service learning in the university setting.	One month before start of semester
University partner, Community partner, University students	Have the university instructor arrange for the university students to meet with the community partner to determine due dates for publicity and sign-ups, duties, and the date of the event.	First month of semester
University students with Community partner as needed	Enact a plan of action. Potential committees include publicity, refreshments, and preparation for event (read books, write questions, make slides, etc.).	Next two months
University partner, Community partner, University students, Middle/High school students	Hold event.	Try to tie it into a theme, either a holiday or a book. Take lots of pictures (get permission to use them), and publicize your event's success.

Figure 2. Suggested timeline for organizing a Book Battle

Guidelines for Service-Learning Opportunities

If you're interested in adding service learning to your course, please consider the following:

- Explore what support your college or university has for those interested in service learning.
- Think of a community partner who would align best with your course objectives. Don't limit yourself to the English language arts classroom.
- Plan early. Meet with your community partner as soon as you can to discuss details, such as ideas for projects and important information for students, and allow time to gather resources.
- Create a contract for your community partner, your university students, and you. Agree on parameters of the project, division of responsibilities, methods of communication, and periodic check-ins. Each participant should sign the contract and be provided with a copy.
- Communicate frequently with your students and your community partner. Visit the site, and attend students' planning meetings to check in.
- Be flexible. Sometimes your best ideas will be met with opposition, or students will not follow through on commitments. Outline what the consequences will be in your syllabus and/or contract.
- Advertise your event widely. Take lots of pictures (get permission to use them), and publicize your event's success. It's great publicity for you, your institution, your university students, and your community partner.
- After the event, evaluate the partnership with your partner, students, and someone not involved with the service-learning component. Decide if you'd like to maintain the partnership, and decide what improvements can be made for the next time. If you are unable to continue the relationship for any reason, thank the community partner and let him/her know that you appreciated the collaborative opportunity but won't be able to continue the partnership.
- Celebrate the success of your service-learning experience with all involved.

Figure 3. Recommendations for those interested in adding a service-learning component to their young adult literature course

how to modify the Book Battle, including ideas on how to include different types of challenges (such as a maze challenge based on *The Maze Runner*).

In the end, to sustain, to expand, and to refresh, we'll all need one another as partners.

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Jay LeSaicherre is a 6th-grade ELA teacher at Gonzales Middle School. He earned a Master's in the Art of Teaching from Louisiana State University with a certification in English and Speech.

Kylie Morris is a 10th-grade student at LSU Lab School. She is an aspiring med student (either a pediatrician or a veterinarian) and currently has little time to read for leisure because of exams. She is a member of the school's show choir, and *Harry Potter* remains her favorite book series.

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BOOK IN REVIEW: A TEACHING GUIDE

Barbara A. **Ward**



Trying to Find Themselves:

Teen Literary Characters in Search of Identity and the Right Paths

This article is also available in an online format that allows direct access to all links included. We encourage you to access it on the ALAN website at <http://www.alan-ya.org/publications/the-alan-review/the-alan-review-columns>.

As *The ALAN Review* “Book in Review” inaugural columnist, S. d. Collins, passes the baton on to me, I feel as though I’m in the midst of a fast race to the finish line with swift delivery persons leaving boxes of books just ahead of my path and coming up hard on my heels. There are so many enticing YA books to read and so many books upon which to reflect. I’ve enjoyed the books and issues my column predecessor has highlighted in previous issues of the journal, and I am delighted to have the chance to share my thoughts on some books that offer value for today’s English language arts classrooms.

As I sorted through the many young adult literature titles I’ve read recently in preparation for the column, I kept identifying and then discarding themes. What should the focus of the column be? There are so many important issues in the world, so which ones should I highlight through books for teens? Should I adhere to *TAR*’s suggested theme about partnerships within and across schools and communities, or should I play the rebel and launch in my own direction? As I contemplated all of this and was overwhelmed by the choices spread out before me, I realized that like many teens, mine was a column in search of an identity. The problem was that I had too many identities and too many directions in which to turn. Ah, perhaps *that* should be the focus. Perhaps I should choose two

books dealing with identity but also tangentially related to teens involved in changing the world around them—through partnerships with classmates in their immediate school community or even through removing themselves from that community briefly.

Even as adults, many of us struggle with identity issues. Who am I? Where do I fit in? How can I make my mark on the world and leave it changed by my presence? These are queries commonly posed by teens today. Sometimes identities are so interwoven with the fabric of the questioner’s own family that it is almost impossible to separate what the teen wants from what his/her parents or guardians want. At other times, involvement in a romantic relationship has a dark side, hinting at the possible disappearance of one of the partners, subsumed into the relationship itself or the expectations of the beloved one. Through all this self-reflection lurks the consideration of how to be true to oneself while also pleasing others.

This issue’s “Book in Review” column explores two books by two different authors. *The Kidney Hypothetical or How to Ruin Your Life in Seven Days* by Lisa Yee (2015) examines how trying to adhere to the expectations of others can lead to veering so far off track from your own goals and ambitions that you don’t even recognize who you are, where you’re going, or how you got there. The other book, *We Can Work It Out* by Elizabeth Eulberg (2015), offers a rollercoaster ride through the life of a girl who has decided not to waste time getting the boy but instead focuses on making the world better for herself and those around her—and then what happens to those plans when she still gets the boy. Both books clearly have

common themes, including journeys of self-discovery and empowerment and taking action to change the world around you, even in some small way. Change must begin with each of us before we can start to move on to larger, systemic alterations.

About the Authors

Lisa Yee, a Chinese American writer born and raised near Los Angeles, California, is best known for her middle grade books, *Millicent Min*, *Girl Genius* (2003), *Stanford Wong Flunks Big Time* (2005), and *So Totally Emily Ebers* (2008). She is debuting in the YA market with *The Kidney Hypothetical or How to Ruin Your Life in Seven Days*, an intriguing YA title that explores possibilities about the way life opens up when one refuses to accept the path laid out by others. While it's possible that Yee drew inspiration for her protagonist from her own time as a member of her high school debate team and president of her high school honor society, she claims that the story was informed by her own daughter's experience with a water tower and law enforcement officials. The author has also been an inventor, jingles writer, and employee at Walt Disney World.

The other author, Elizabeth Eulberg, has been a prolific YA author since her first book, *The Lonely Hearts Club*, was published in 2009. It was followed by *Prom & Prejudice* (2011), *Take a Bow* (2012), *Revenge of the Girl with the Great Personality* (2013), *Better off Friends* (2014), and *We Can Work It Out* (2015). Born in a small Wisconsin town to a mother who was a teacher who became a stay-at-home mom until her children entered school and then became a librarian, and a father who was the owner of a clothing store that has been in the family since 1929, she grew up loving to travel, read, and listen to music, passions that remain with her still and are woven into the fabric of her books.

You can learn more about these authors on their websites at <http://www.lisayee.com/> and <http://www.elizabetheulberg.com/>.

About the Books

The Kidney Hypothetical

We've all known someone like Higgs Boson Bing, the protagonist in *The Kidney Hypothetical or How to Ruin Your Life in Seven Days*. Anticipating college at

Harvard after a wildly successful high school career, Bing considers himself to be the king of the world, or at least his small fiefdom. His father has plans for Bing to join his successful dental practice as he moves through college just as successfully as he matriculated through high school. Although Bing doesn't realize it, this is neither the life he wants nor the path he needs to follow. With a week remaining in his stellar high school career, the senior blows everything and, in doing so, perhaps saves himself. On the senior cruise around the bay near his school, Sally Ride High School, he responds honestly and negatively to a hypothetical question about whether he'd donate a kidney to his long-time girlfriend. His honesty has unexpected results: Roo immediately breaks up with him, and he is saddled with the moniker of Dinky Dick when he arrives back on campus. Suddenly, he becomes the laughing stock on campus, and he realizes that he may be well known but isn't particularly well liked.

As Bing reflects on how things have gone wrong, he realizes that his life has been a series of lies and that he's been living someone else's life. Because his older brother Jeffrey died before fulfilling his family's expectations, Higgs has been following in his brother's footsteps. Over the next seven days, he engages in a soul-searching process that leads to acts of rebellious liberation; he faces several fears with the help of Monarch, a girl who assists with his questioning and psychological makeover. Yee deftly tackles several tough issues, including loss, expectations, family dynamics, imperfections, and social pecking orders, all with empathy and humor. Several evocative passages show clearly Higgs's fondness for his garden and working with his hands, and readers will realize long before he does that perhaps dentistry is not the right career for him.

We Can Work It Out

With chapter titles and lyrics from well-known Beatles songs serving as pitch-perfect epigrams detailing the misadventures of Penny Lane Bloom, this book, the follow-up to the author's earlier *The Lonely Hearts*

Change must begin with each of us before we can start to move on to larger, systemic alterations.

Club, examines another teen's attempts to find herself while maneuvering through the high school social pecking order. Junior Penny Lane [yes, she was named after *that* song] continues to nurture her female empowerment club while trying to balance a romantic relationship herself. Although Penny knows she doesn't need a boyfriend to feel good about herself, she also enjoys spending time with

Imagine whom and where you will be in 10 years, 25, 50. Sketch out a roadmap of your life from right now to right then.

the kind and supportive Ryan who might be the most patient guy in the world. Even though Ryan seems to come last on his girlfriend's list of priorities, he still loves her because she is so involved in self-empowerment causes and eschews the typical high school drama. As the novel's protagonist deals

with homework, school dances, the prom, club meetings, and a dance-a-thon to raise scholarship money, she vacillates among various conceptions of what she really wants with and from Ryan.

Amid hilarious scenes featuring her Beatles-loving parents and some of her less supportive classmates who offer verbal abuse and ridicule, Penny Lane remains true to her purposes and is reminded that relationships, in whatever form they may appear, matter and reveal a great deal about each of us. Teen girls especially would benefit from reading this book and its predecessor as a reminder that one's identity does not depend upon a romantic relationship. After all, while some relationships are worth the hard work, others are not, and having a boyfriend is not a prerequisite for graduating from high school. No one needs to give up parts of him/herself in order to please someone else.

Using the Books in the Classroom

Pre-reading Activities

Since to some extent, neither Higgs Boson Bing in *The Kidney Hypothetical* nor Penny Lane Bloom in *We Can Work It Out* chooses to be defined by the expectations of others in their lives—in his case, the expectations of his father, and hers, and her reduced expectations of her boyfriend's best friend and some of her other nay-

saying classmates—it might be useful to make a list of what others expect from you. Next make another list of your expectations for yourself. Then compare the two lists. Imagine whom and where you will be in 10 years, 25, 50. Sketch out a roadmap of your life from right now to right then.

Popular culture plays an important role in both books. To set the mood for *We Can Work It Out*, search for CDs of the music played by the Beatles. Additionally, in order to understand Penny Lane's parents better, listen to some clips of the music of the Beatles from YouTube, in particular "Penny Lane," which is about a place, not a person, but still offers clues to her parents' Beatles obsession: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZBcJGphTEE>. As you listen, pay attention to the lyrics to determine why Penny Lane's parents were so fond of the song that they chose to name their daughter in its honor. Then, go online again to view images of the real Penny Lane in Liverpool, England. After finding at least five different links to the street that inspired the song, decide for yourself what makes the place so special now. Now that you've savored some Beatles and UK ambiance, take photos of a place that is special to you. Use those photos to create a physical scrapbook or a cyber scrapbook with the help of Smilebox at <http://www.smilebox.com/>.

The author opens *The Kidney Hypothetical* with Higgs leaning out over the prow of a ship in Leonardo DiCaprio style from the blockbuster movie, *The Titanic*. Watch the "I'm the King of the World" scene that sets the tone for the film and this book: <http://www.imdb.com/video/imdb/vi2676989977/>. After viewing the clip, write a three-minute reaction to what you just saw. How does the character feel? How does his reaction make you feel? What reasons might the author have for beginning his book with a reenactment of the famous scene?

Higgs can trace the unraveling of his life to one event: the moment during the senior class sailing trip when he gave an honest response to the hypothetical question of whether or not he would give up a kidney for his girlfriend, Roo. Although he surely knows better than to respond honestly and not give the expected response, for some reason, he chooses the truth. Havoc results with Roo breaking up with him and most of the other females allying with her. From there, things only get worse for Higgs. With this fictional situation

in mind, free-write a response to this question: How do you respond to hypothetical questions? Are they meant to be taken seriously? Do our responses really reveal what we'd actually do when faced with the hypothetical situation for real, or are they simply another way to be dishonest or inauthentic?

Interdisciplinary Connections

In *The Kidney Hypothetical*, Higgs loves gardening. He spends hours nurturing the plants that will bear fruit and then carefully harvesting the produce. Once he brings the crops back into the house, he cleans what he has gathered, even polishing some of the fruits before giving them to his neighbors. Investigate community gardens as well as backyard gardens and identify some of the requirements necessary for his garden to thrive.

In *We Can Work It Out*, Penny Lane nurtures the self-empowering Lonely Hearts Club whose purpose is to show other teen girls that their self-esteem should not be based on males' reactions to them and that friendship between females is at least as important as having a boyfriend. During the next two weeks as you watch television programs, movies, and advertisements, explore websites and/or listen to music, then record what you notice about the relationships between males and females. After you have collected this data, create a collage made from pictures torn from magazines to represent the messages that are being sent through these venues.

Group Discussion Questions

1. *We Can Work It Out* is told by a female narrator, while *The Kidney Hypothetical* is told by a male narrator. How might these stories differ if the genders of the narrators were different? What do readers gain and lose through the perspective that is offered in each book? How might each protagonist's parents have told their child's stories?
2. Both Penny Lane Bloom and Higgs Boson Bing clash with some of the authority figures in their lives, including the school principal. Do the two characters simply have a problem following directions, or is there something more at stake for them in these interactions?
3. In a sense, both protagonists shake up the worlds around them—Penny by organizing the Lonely Hearts Club and funding scholarships for worthy senior girls, Higgs by giving an impromptu graduation speech in which he urges his classmates to live up to their own expectations and not someone else's. Which protagonist do you think has the greatest impact on his/her audience? Why? With which protagonist do you most identify? Why?
4. Both Penny Lane and Higgs have secrets that they have not revealed to their current set of friends or to their family members. Why do you think they continue to hold onto these secrets? What would happen if the secrets were revealed?
5. It seems to be a truism that in order to get admitted to the best college, high school students like Penny Lane and Higgs must be deeply involved in school activities. After considering lists of all their accomplishments, reflect on whether it is possible to be too busy participating in extracurricular activities to have time to study or to follow other passions. As the bar for admissions to elite schools continues to rise, what advice would you give to high-achieving students such as the narrators? Why would you advise them in that way?
6. Friends are essential to both of the main characters in the two books. Why is it so hard for the friends of both Penny Lane and Higgs to tell them the truth? Why is it so hard for them to hear the truth? Why does it take someone that he has only recently met—Monarch—to help Higgs realize that he has taken the wrong path? Once Higgs learns the truth about Monarch, why is he so dismayed about her advice and guidance?
7. Consider the unique structure of each book—chapters beginning with Beatles song titles and snippets of lyrics in *We Can Work It Out*, and a daily countdown of the week before graduation from Sunday to Saturday in *The Kidney Hypothetical*. How do these frameworks help the books work? In what ways do they detract from the stories?
8. Both protagonists must speak before large groups of people on numerous occasions, sometimes without preparation. What are the most important messages they share with their audiences over the course of the book? What attracts Higgs to the debate team and Penny Lane to her Lonely Hearts Club?
9. If you were creating a playlist for one of the secondary characters in either book, what would be some essential songs that you would include? Why?

10. Both Penny Lane and Higgs have romantic interests of sorts. In what ways are those love interests supportive of and/or detrimental to their growth?
11. Compare and contrast the behaviors and expectations of the Blooms and the Bings toward their offspring and toward each other.
12. What do you think will happen next for these two adolescents, Penny Lane and Higgs, poised on the brink of the rest of their lives? Why do you think this will happen? If you could attend their ten-year high school reunions, what changes might have occurred in their lives and career paths?

Wonderful Words Worth Noting

Both books exhibit many of the traits used by good writers. With a partner, discuss how each passage listed below makes you feel and what information it provides about the speaker. Since both books are told from the first-person point of view, the quotes allow readers to take a peek into their psyches.

From *The Kidney Hypothetical*

“Gossip spreads fast in high school. I would say that it spreads like wildfire, but that wouldn’t be right. It spreads faster. There’s nothing more invigorating to the student body than a good rumor, especially if it’s about someone you know.” (p. 9)

“I started to run and knocked down several students. As I stumbled, I could hear them yelling at me, only it sounded like we were underwater, and I was drowning.” (p. 112)

“I brought my bounty into the house and washed and polished each apple, each zucchini, everything, individually. Then I got out the paper bags, and when they were full, I left them at the doors of some of our neighbors. I didn’t need to leave a note, they’d know who it was from.” (p. 144)

“Outside the sunshine was blinding. It had been the longest night of my life and all I wanted to do was go home and sleep in my own bed. Nothing made sense—not that it ever did.” (p. 236)

“Today would be for my father, I had decided. But tomorrow would be for me.” (p. 266)

From *We Can Work It Out*

“I never thought I would regret having a boyfriend who was so generous, but it really did make it hard to compete with him.” (p. 91)

“I decided to stop pretending that I could handle it all. Because it was clear that I couldn’t. I let everything go.” (p. 113)

“One person’s humiliation was another’s source of pure joy.” (p. 145)

“I’d become hyperaware of every minute I spent with Ryan. On the outside he looked the same (except for the bruise on his face and small cut on his lip from the fight). But everything else had changed so much. I had to find one thing that was still going well for him. I had to convince myself that I hadn’t ruined his life.” (p. 162)

“What I did know is that relationships, like life, are all about balance. And that the heart really is the strongest muscle. It would heal. All it would take was time and some awesome friends by your side.” (p. 305)

Now return to both books and choose a passage that is meaningful to you. Share it with a partner and explain what it means, why it’s significant, and why it speaks to you so powerfully.

Post-Reading Activities

Write the very next chapter in the continuation of the story of Higgs or of Penny Lane. What happens next?

Imagine that Penny Lane and Higgs meet each other after both of them head off to college. Of course, he’s a little bit older than she is, but still, they might end up running in the same circles. Craft a scene describing their first encounter. Then find a classmate with whom to perform the scene.

Since they represent graphically the relationships between individuals in a group, sociograms can be valuable in understanding group dynamics in school and in life outside the classroom. First, read a brief explanation of sociograms in “Sociograms: Mapping the Emotional Dynamics of a Classroom” at <http://www.6seconds.org/2012/05/08/sociograms-mapping-the-emotional-dynamics-of-a-classroom/>. Next, create a sociogram that indicates the relationships at work in first one and then the other book. Compare the results and draw conclusions about the importance of relationships for Penny Lane Bloom and for Higgs Boson Bing.

Both main characters have unique, ear-catching names. Discuss with a classmate the importance of one’s name. If you have a story behind your name, share it with a classmate. Then, consider the possible

impact of the characters having been christened with more common names. How might their lives have been different by that simple yet important decision?

These Remind Me of You

The two books featured in this column are fairly different because of how empowered their protagonists are, but they aren't alone. Some additional books that might be worth a second look include the following:

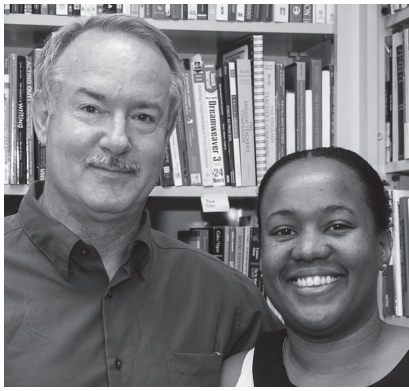
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Arts in the public schools of New Orleans where she was rarely seen without a book in hand. Barbara invites you to contact her at barbara_ward@wsu.edu.

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RIGHT TO READ

James **Blasingame** and
E. Sybil **Durand**



“The Books That Will Never Be Read”

This article is also available in an online format that allows direct access to all links included. We encourage you to access it on the ALAN website at <http://www.alan-ya.org/publications/the-alan-review/the-alan-review-columns/>.

“It’s not just the books under fire now that worry me. It is the books that will never be written, the books that will never be read” (Judy Blume, n.d.).

The theme of this issue of *The ALAN Review*, “Beyond Borders: Partnering within and across Schools and Communities,” has special significance for our Right to Read column, since its name and focus represent a right that is challenged on a regular basis in classrooms and school libraries across the United States. In a multicultural society, classrooms are often sites where the curriculum and the values of multiple communities collide. The borders between these communities—whether cultural or political—can be at once so muddled and so viciously guarded as to make censorship a confusing and divisive issue. At its worst, censorship has the potential to silence diverse voices in a curriculum that still struggles to adequately represent and address the needs of a diverse student population. And yet, people from diverse political perspectives have the capacity to come together and reach consensus on an issue as polarizing as what books we should make available to our children. In this issue’s column, we attempt to answer two questions: 1) How do books come to be challenged in the first place? and 2) How can unjustified book challenges be overcome?

To answer these questions, we have asked for help from authors, attorneys, and local community members. YA authors Laurie Halse Anderson, Jack Gantos, Lauren Myracle, Chris Crutcher, Bill Konigsberg, and Matt de la Peña share their thoughts on the impact of banned books and the motivations for challenging them. We also take a look at curricular battles waged in politically torn school districts and at how school board members and the administration in one district have prevailed in defending First Amendment rights in the face of substantial pressure to remove books from the classroom.

What Is at Stake?

Some attacks on books are hard to take seriously, even when they may suggest the motivation behind the negative response. As an example, Jack Gantos explained to us:

Ralph, the feline protagonist of the Rotten Ralph picture-books [1976–2011], has been accused of being the devil in disguise. One elementary principal banned it from being read—while I was reading it to a library full of students. She stood in front of the students and bellowed, “Ralph is the devil!” and marched out. That was an awkward moment—but more psychotic than sensible. I mean, a cat can be “devilish” but it cannot be “the devil.” (J. Gantos, personal communication, April 4, 2015)

At first glance, it seems rather comical: a pesky cartoon cat named Ralph, Jack Gantos reading to kids in the library, an enraged elementary school principal screaming about the devil incarnate. It almost sounds like something that would happen in a Joey Pigza book (1998–2014), a series that Jack told us is seldom

challenged. Jack acknowledges that although *Desire Lines* (1997) and *The Love Curse of the Rumbaughs* (2006) have been successful books, they are seldom used in classrooms, probably due to their content: same sex romance, the American eugenics movement, and murder/suicide. Neither an imaginary cat nor a 12-year-old with ADHD, however, seems to be seriously threatening to the majority of censors.

What do seem threatening, however, are books with sexual content and books that challenge an unquestioning version of US history and current status quo. While most can understand adults' desires to introduce sensitive topics at an appropriate time for children, the stakes are particularly high when an individual successfully challenges a book selected or recommended by a teacher or librarian. In her 2006 article, "The Voices of Power and the Power of Voices," titled in homage to Elsa Auerbach's (1999) presentation about privileged and unprivileged voices, Dr. Marlinda White-Kaulaity tells us that "when certain voices are excluded, students never hear and experience the 'power of voices.'" Such young readers are denied "one purpose of literature: to read and learn about themselves and others" (p. 8). The law against Ethnic Studies in Arizona's K-12 schools (HB2281) is an example of attempts to remove one particular voice that seemed threatening to the dominant group.

In the famous, if not decisive, censorship case, *Board of Education vs. Pico* (1982), a school board sought to remove *Slaughterhouse-Five* (Vonnegut, 1991), *The Best Short Stories of Negro Writers* (Hughes, 1967), *Soul on Ice* (Cleaver, 1991), *The Fixer* (Malamud, 1966), and *Go Ask Alice* (Anonymous, 1971) from the school's curriculum. Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun held that "school officials may not remove books from school libraries for the purpose of restricting access to the political ideas or social perspectives discussed in the books, when that action is motivated simply by the officials' disapproval of the ideas involved" (Introduction, Section 2, para. 2). And of course, the landmark case of *Tinker vs. Des Moines* in 1969 found that neither "students [n]or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate," including the right to access books they chose to read (Section I, para. 1).

In the following sections, however, we discuss

several instances where adults, in their attempts to shield young people from content that clashes with their own personal or political values, silenced voices and perspectives that have been traditionally marginalized in the curriculum.

Mexican American Studies

The Arizona legislature's law HB2281, most often called the Anti-Ethnic Studies Law, was passed by the Arizona House and Senate and signed into law by Arizona Governor Jan Brewer in 2010. It outlawed K-12 curriculum that met a four-pronged test, which included two of the following criteria: the curriculum must not be "designed primarily for pupils of a particular

ethnic group" or "advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals" (Arizona State Legislature, 2010, p. 1). It has been suggested that this legislation was the result of political conflict between Arizona Superintendent of Schools Tom Horne and high school students and teachers in Tucson concerning a school visit from Mexican American Civil Rights leader Dolores Huerta. Huerta, cofounder of the National Farm Workers Association with César Chávez and a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Eleanor Roosevelt Award for Human Rights, was invited to speak to students in an assembly at Tucson High School. At a time when four state ballot initiatives and a federal immigration reform bill targeted immigrants, anti-immigrant protests were common across the country. Huerta "was asking [students] to look at the legislation and challenging them to start a campaign to address why 'Republicans hate Latinos'" (Herrera, 2013). Horne, who would become Attorney General, sent Deputy Superintendent of Schools Margaret Dugan, a Republican of Mexican heritage, to provide students with an opposing viewpoint, but she received a hostile response from students. The struggle for control that followed seems more political than educational, but perhaps the two are inseparable.

What do seem threatening, however, are books with sexual content and books that challenge an unquestioning version of US history and current status quo.

From an educational standpoint, the Mexican American Studies program was experiencing tangible success reified by empirical data. The program was originally implemented after a 1970s federal court

order over desegregation. Data were collected and statistical tests applied for the 26,022 Latino/a students from the graduating classes of 2008, 2009, and 2010. Statistically significant differences were found in two categories between those who took the Mexican American Studies classes and their peers who did not: 1) passing rates on the high-stakes Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards, and 2) successful rates of graduation

(Hawley, Cabrera, Milem, & Marx, 2012).

So why did Superintendent of Arizona Schools Tom Horne and his predecessor, Jon Hupenthal, insist on banning the classes and the books in the curriculum, despite the findings of an independent evaluator hired by the state in 2010? Hupenthal claimed that when the classroom doors closed, teachers were fomenting racial hatred:

Do you cover those injustices in a way in which we say these are profound things that we should be aware of and we have to work in this country to make this country a better place? Or do you use those injustices to create racial division, and do you use those injustices to create hatred? (qtd. in Robbins, 2013)

Taking landmark books away from kids, books that help them to make sense of their place in the world, hardly seems a means “to make this country a better place.” In fact, it would seem to confirm that these “injustices” are systemic and ongoing. According to Appeals Attorney Anjana Malhotra, the curriculum was designed to right a wrong, and the ban on it was more of the original injustice and probably unconstitutional:

Indeed, the curriculum was developed to redress decades of discrimination against Latino students and was successful because it was based on a pedagogy that promotes equality. . . . The question here is more fundamental: whether the US Constitution allows the state of Arizona to enact a

broad, subjective, and sweeping law giving state educational officials unlimited power, and then enforce it only to target and suppress an entire educational curriculum for Mexican American students. (Seattle University School of Law, 2013)

As Augustine F. Romero, former director of Tucson’s Multicultural Curriculum Unit, now Principal at Pueblo Magnet High School, explained for the *New York Times*: “All our forefathers have contributed to this country, not just one set of forefathers. . . . We respect and admire and appreciate the traditional forefathers, but there are others” (Lacey, 2011, p. A1).

Some of the classes were reinstated to the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) course offerings in 2013, along with new classes in African American culture and history offered in response to an ongoing federal desegregation case from decades ago. However, Horne’s predecessor, Jon Hupenthal, took one parting shot at the classes before he was voted out of office in 2014, declaring them in violation of HB2281. Arizona’s new Superintendent of Schools, Diane Douglas, countermanded his order, saying that the schools would not lose their funding and that the classes, while in need of some revising, were not illegal.

Among the books now in boxes in a TUSD warehouse is Matt de la Peña’s *Mexican WhiteBoy* (2008), the story of a bicultural, biracial teen in San Diego who is trying to navigate multiple cultures. The book is based on the author’s life experience and has won numerous awards from the American Library Association, the Junior Library Guild, the Texas TAYSHAS, and the Center for Children’s Books. We asked Matt to share his thoughts on the impact of removing that book from the curriculum:

I was fortunate enough to be able to visit Tucson High School just after *Mexican WhiteBoy* was pulled from the curriculum. Students were actually reading the novel in one classroom when representatives from the school board barged into the room, literally took the books out of kids’ hands, and took them to the basement in boxes. What a brutal metaphor. These kids were not only stripped of a program they took ownership of, that they were thriving in; they were also taught that books written by authors that looked like them were no longer fit to teach. Not exactly a great message. I expected to find these kids beaten down when I arrived on campus, and some were, but the majority of them were fighting the loss of their program and their books and their teachers. I spoke to a generation of emerging activists that day. (M. de la Peña, personal communication, April 6, 2015)

And maybe that was what made this curriculum and these books so threatening; young people were learning to stand up to injustice against their own people, and they were learning it from books.

And maybe that was what made this curriculum and these books so threatening; young people were learning to stand up to injustice against their own people, and they were learning it from books.

Sexual Content and Sexuality

Young adult books with sexual content are often challenged for exploring topics that seemingly exceed the maturity of intended readers. In a 2014 article in *The Federalist* web magazine, Mark Hemingway, senior writer for *The Weekly Standard* whose conservative opinions have also appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and on Fox News, takes a few potshots at Lauren Myracle (author of *ttyl*, 2004; *ttfn*, 2006; *l8r, g8r*, 2007; *Shine*, 2011; and more). Hemingway (2014) begins by deriding the format of her novels, given their use of email/text shorthand, a language he is quite certain will not be around for long: “Text speak might be yet another classic example of a faddish teenage behavior that adults erroneously believe is more prevalent than it is” (Hemingway, 2014). If Hemingway truly believes that “text speak” is a fad, then all we can do is LOL! Although he admits that *Kirkus Reviews* called these titles “perfectly contemporary,” and *Teen Magazine* said they would “chang[e] the way you read” (as cited on the book jackets), he continued to degrade Myracle’s writing as “subliterate.”

Hemingway’s most potent accusation is that Myracle’s books have content from which young readers should be steered clear; by that, of course, he means sex. Banning “dirty books” provides an easy rallying point for community; these charges are often lumped in with other approved “bad guys,” such as socialism, political correctness, and gender equity. One of Hemingway’s biggest complaints about the sexual content in Myracle’s 2004 *ttyl* (*Talk to You Later*) is that the characters have a critical email conversation about a “lecherous Christian teacher” who is always staring at their chests—and not to read the slogans on their shirts. Obviously, such behavior by male authority figures can be terribly disconcerting to young women. Myracle’s conversation among friends about this topic may very well alleviate emotional and psychological tension for the title’s readers.

Is it likely that a parent would take up this subject with a child? Is it likely that a child would express distress to a parent? Probably not. We asked Laurie

Halse Anderson, whose books often include sexual forewarnings for young people who may be socially naïve and unarmed until reading *Speak* (1999) or *Twisted* (2008), about the dynamics of censoring this sort of material:

The parents who try to ban books are afraid; they don’t know how to talk to their children about things like sex and violence. I have some compassion for the parents and nothing but contempt for the politicians. The politicians who try to ban books are the worst sort of Americans; evil-minded, craven cynics who manipulate the fears of parents in order to further their own political agenda. (L. Anderson, personal communication, April 4, 2015)

And let’s not forget archconservative talk show hosts and rightwing news pundits.

We asked Lauren Myracle to share her thoughts on withholding books from young readers, the impact of such a choice, and the repercussions of losing a book from the universe of young adult reading. She told us that “sometimes a single book can change a kid’s life. Sometimes a book can save a life. If that book isn’t on the shelf, what happens to the kid who needs it most?” (L. Myracle, personal communication, April 4, 2015).

And this brings us back to Judy Blume’s concern “for the books that will never be read” and why some parents might listen to those who want books with mature content removed from the curriculum.

Book banning satisfies their need to feel in control of their children’s lives. This fear is often disguised as moral outrage. They want to believe that if their children don’t read about it, their children won’t know about it. And if they don’t know about it, it won’t happen. (Blume, n.d.)

Banning “dirty books” provides an easy rallying point, a sort of comfortable community for folks who are not sure how to talk about these things with their children—and prefer that no one else do it either. Difficult topics can include LGBTQ content. We asked Lambda Award winner Bill Konigsberg (*Out of the Pocket*,

Banning “dirty books” provides an easy rallying point for community; these charges are often lumped in with other approved “bad guys,” such as socialism, political correctness, and gender equity.

2008; *Openly Straight*, 2013; *The Porcupine of Truth*, 2015) about his experience with censorship:

I think the only reason anyone would censor my books would be for LGBTQ content. There are still people who wish to keep their heads in the sand and believe that gay and lesbian people don't exist, but that number is getting smaller all the time. It's a good thing that the one attempt to censor *Openly Straight* in Texas failed. The school board saw through the blatant homophobia of that attempt. I say it's a good thing because censoring books that allow teens to see reflections of themselves is evil. It sends the

message to those kids that what they are is bad, and that their stories don't matter. (B. Konigsberg, personal communication, April 4, 2015)

Doesn't everyone's story matter, and matter equally? And why are some voices and some versions of history threatening? Perhaps Oscar Wilde (2003) was correct in say-

ing that "what the world calls immoral are the books that show the world its shame" (p. 208).

School and Community against Censorship

When *Beloved* (Morrison, 2000) and *The Bean Trees* (Kingsolver, 1988) were recently under attack in Gilbert, Arizona, teachers, school board members, professors at two universities, and the Gilbert Superintendent collaborated to fight the challenge. Although the two books had been in the curriculum for decades, school board members reported up to 200 recent emails claiming that *Beloved* is not only "pornographic" but also "glorifies death as a form of entertainment" (Gilbert Public Schools, 2015). School board member Jill Humphreys took it upon herself not only to read both books but also to seek informed opinions, visiting with professors at both Brigham Young University and Arizona State University. She arrived at the January 27, 2015, school board meeting ready to share her findings. According to Humphreys:

Our goal here is to graduate students who are critical thinkers, who can grapple with problems, can think about what is right and wrong, and be empathetic with other people. The study of literature is an important component of being

able to do that. . . . If a board member or parent wants to remove a book from the reading list, we cannot do this as a top-down decision and just remove it; we must have a committee devote the necessary study and discussion of the book and bring a recommendation to the board for further discussion. (Gilbert Public Schools, 2015)

Humphreys continued by citing the 1977 US Circuit Court of Appeals case of *Minarcini v. Strongsville*, Ohio (1976), in which a school board would not allow a teacher to continue teaching *Catch 22* (Heller, 1955) or *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (Vonnegut, 1965). According to the court, "Once a book is in, it may not be withdrawn by subsequent school boards or the library will fail to be a storehouse of knowledge and be winnowed down over time." Humphreys also quoted from an email she received from Arizona State University Professor of English Education James Blasingame in which he provided a summary of the law in regard to book censoring in public schools: "The federal government has given power over the educational program to the states, and they have given it to elected local school boards. Parents have power over what their own children read in school, but no one has the right to decide what someone else's children may read. That is a violation of the First Amendment" (Gilbert Public Schools, 2015).

Humphreys also read from an email to her from Brigham Young University Associate Professor of English Susan Howe, who gave a rationale for using *Beloved* in the classroom:

This story never justifies evil or presents any evil action as being exciting, titillating, or desirable. One of the purposes of literature is to help readers comprehend the conditions of the world so that they will be prepared to combat evil when they encounter it and that purpose is Toni Morrison's in this novel. (Gilbert Public Schools, 2015)

Humphrey's final words to the board were as follows:

I think we need to trust our educators and our students that they will be able to handle these complex and complicated readings that help them to form ethical and moral decisions in their own lives. By experiencing these dilemmas vicariously, they can have a better chance of thinking through what they would do as that character or how they would respond in that situation. (Gilbert Public Schools, 2015)

The Gilbert Public School Board voted 5-0 to retain the current high school reading list, which included *Beloved* and *The Bean Trees*. Superintendent of Schools Dr. Christina M. Kishimoto added to the mo-

We underestimate our young people when we decide for them that they are not ready to make adult meaning of their lives.

tion that in an effort to help parents make curricular decisions for their children, the district curriculum team of teachers would provide a resource that would make available to the public information about all the books on the approved reading list, including potentially objectionable content, the educational value in using each book, and the themes and topics the books were used to teach.

Beloved (Morrison, 2000) has very mature content, but it takes that content to make the author's point in ways that can only be accomplished through what Dr. White-Kaulaity (2006) calls "the power of literature" (p. 8). We underestimate our young people when we decide for them that they are not ready to make adult meaning of their lives. When asked why he never balks at including the gritty aspects of life in his novels, Sherman Alexie said, "Kids have complicated and emotional lives," and disallowing literature that reflects this is a failure "to take kids seriously. It's condescension. Kids respond well when they are taken seriously" (as cited in Blasingame, 2008, p. 74).

We close with an email from Chris Crutcher, from whom we asked for advice for educators faced with censorship issues:

The advice I have is for teachers and administrators. If I'm an English teacher with the funds of knowledge about young adult literature that I would have coming out of, say, a program like Alan Brown's or Joan Kaywell's or any of the big ALAN stalwarts, I'm going to know a *lot* about reading level and content and intensity of interest. Added years of experience in the field of education will increase that expertise geometrically. At the beginning of every year, I'd get all my like-minded colleagues together and meet with any and all administrators and extract from them a commitment to support my expertise as an education professional. (C. Crutcher, personal communication, April 5, 2015)

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LAYERED LITERACIES

Sandra Schamroth **Abrams**
and Hannah R. **Gerber**



Layering Meaning across Literate Practices

This article is also available in an online format that allows direct access to all links included. We encourage you to access it on the ALAN website at <http://www.alan-ya.org/publications/the-alan-review/the-alan-review-columns>.

Innovative teaching and learning stem from expansive understandings and layers of meaning making. We use the term “layers” not to suggest that literacies are simply piled on top of one another in a cumulative fashion. Rather, we embrace the fact that learning is not linear; it is multidirectional and fluid. Layering represents the movement inherent in learning that includes combinations of independent and collaborative, as well as iterative and generative, practices and (re)interpretations of meaning (Abrams, 2015).

What might this layering look like? When I (Sandra) observed adolescents playing videogames in a public library 15 miles outside of New York City, I noticed how they moved from pursuing informal, collaborative homework sessions to reading independently to playing *Guitar Hero* or *Golden Eye* to going online and checking Facebook. These were just some of their practices, and regardless of the activity’s duration, there was no particular pattern; rather, each student had his/her own rhythm in learning, and the process and pace were honored in that space (Abrams, 2015). Such rhythms can exist not only as part of a digital game ecology (Apperley, 2010), but also as part of classroom culture (Abrams, 2015). Further, at the library, students’ active learning involved partnerships and individual practices as they moved back

and forth and across a combination of texts, modes, and activities, using videogaming as a central point for conversation and collaboration. Layering literacies in the classroom certainly can involve technology and online programs (Abrams & Russo, 2015). However, educators can layer literacies, even in classrooms with a range of technological affordances and limitations (Abrams, 2015).

The layering of literacies respects learning as a process and involves collaborative, self-directed, and interest-based experiences. Rooted in youths’ fluid and tacit movement and (re)creation within, across, and beyond online and offline spaces, this understanding of literacies acknowledges socioculturally bound and heavily nuanced meaning making (Street, 1995). Further, it supports perspectives of learning as a multimodal experience; the combination of modes (including, but not limited to, sound, image, gesture, and gaze) impacts ideation, interpretation, and participation. Given that “all texts are multimodal” (Kress, 2010; Stein, 2007, p. 25), learning inherently involves embodied and layered meaning making within and across online and offline texts and practices. We draw upon these concepts to focus on how literacies become layered through a range of online and offline practices.

Other Forms of Layering

Though this column focuses on ways that adolescents’ embodied, layered practices inform learning experiences, the concept of layering also can apply to specific textual features. According to Cynthia Selfe (1989), new digital formats create new design layers. Selfe ex-

amined reading and writing conventions in relation to computer grammars and noted how digital formatting created “new kinds of literacy [that] are layered over and have a substantial impact on the tasks of reading and writing” (p. 6). In many ways, this is related to Rosenblatt’s (1988) transactional theory and how the arrangement of images and margins cue readers to take a particular stance; Rosenblatt used a traditional poem’s structure as an exemplar and called attention to “the arrangement of broad margins and uneven lines that signals the reader should adopt the aesthetic stance and try to make a poem” (p. 6). In other words, the emergence of new formatting in traditional and digital texts has also offered layers of signals to readers; online, if a phrase is underlined or in a colored font (typically blue), the reader may expect that phrase to be hyperlinked to additional information. Other times, the arrangement of words and images provide readers options to encounter information at their own pace. In referring to the layout of words and images in textbooks, Moss (2003) explained how

even the page design of specific texts (e.g., Dorling Kindersley, or DK, texts) can carry specific connotations, as “the DK picture-led non-linear style of layout has become associated with the new as opposed to the old and with play as opposed to work” (p. 84). The arrangement of images and print text dispersed across a page (see Figure 1) gives the reader agency to encounter text at his or her discretion.

In many ways, the non-linear style of this print text resembles that of a videogame. Take, for instance, the screenshot from the videogame, *Battlefield* (see Figure 2). Players interpret and act upon information presented through a combination of images, symbols, and print text. There are status updates related to health, ammunition, and player positioning that line the borders and sit at the corners of the screen. All the while, players need to react based on the information provided in the foreground and background. These are some components of a feedback loop assessment (Abrams & Gerber, 2013) and, because they are interconnected, there are multiple ways to read these texts.

In addition to the layers of text related to on-screen layout, players layer their literacies as they call upon existing knowledge to play the game, engage in online and offline embodied learning, and respond with affective gestures and proclamations (e.g., “Yes!” “Oh man!”). The “layering of texts and experiences happens online, offline, and in-between the two as students negotiate their virtual and non-virtual worlds, skills, and knowledge sets” (Abrams, 2015, p. 15), and the practices that occur within and around gaming represent past and present understandings, as well as intentions for future meaning making. When they are videogaming, youth engage in, interpret, and respond to multimodal semiotic systems on *and* off the screen. Such learning is embodied and fluid; it involves “mov[ing] between the online and offline worlds, using the knowledge gleaned in each to understand and to participate in socially ensconced spaces” (Abrams, 2015, p. 111). In other words, layering literacies involves honoring fluid, porous, and flexible meaning



Figure 1. An example of a text with an alternative layout. Though not completely non-linear like Figure 2, this example has non-linear features, as one is not required to read the print and images in a particular order. (From *Eyes Wide Open*. Copyright © 2014 by The Brown-Fleischman Family Trust. Reproduced by permission of the publisher, Candlewick Press, Somerville, MA.)



Figure 2. A screenshot from the videogame, *Battlefield*

making (Abrams, 2015), and layers of literacies contribute to process learning that is both relevant and meaningful.

Fast forward to the emergence of haptic technologies, such as the Xbox Kinect, that hinge on off-screen body movements and gestures to control on-screen activities, as well as touch-enabled devices (e.g., an iPad), and consider how design, format, and multimodalities support interactional meaning-making. Simply watching youth play a game like *Wipe Out* provides insight into the connection between human movement and on-screen avatar actions. As a player jumps in the air to make his/her avatar correspondingly jump over an on-screen obstacle, there is a complex embodied connection that adds a layer of agency to the meaning-making experiences. Likewise, “swiping” pages, tapping links, or enlarging text with two fingers on an iPad creates a level of agency because the learner interacts with and controls the information. Ownership is palpable. Such interaction calls attention not only to the layer of gesture, but also to enhanced learning opportunities, such as the co-production of meaning when a student uses tablet devices alongside traditional texts to complete a task, using one experience to inform the other (Walsh & Simpson, 2013). Harkening back to Selfe’s (1989) discussion of the layering of computer grammars, one can see how choice and ownership of practices are essential for learning to be

personally relevant and meaningful.

Young Adult Literature and Layered Literacies

Young adult literature that draws upon popular culture, such as *In Real Life* (Doctorow & Wang, 2014), also creates (perhaps unanticipated) avenues for youth to relate to the topic and/or integrate their own meaning-making experiences, thus presenting opportunities for layering literacies in the classroom. Though digital interfaces may introduce new mediating components, the online–offline connection contin-

ues to shape and reshape meaning making. And when print texts, such as *In Real Life*, integrate images and themes that draw upon popular culture texts, such as videogames, there are increased opportunities for youth to critically discover, synthesize, and (re)create meaning across online and offline practices. In the following summary of *In Real Life*, one may see how the protagonist’s experiences, which occur across online and offline worlds, can serve as a platform to address critical social issues.

About *In Real Life*

In Real Life is a graphic novel that uses videogame play as a springboard to address issues related to equity, social justice, and adolescence. Vivid illustrations are paired with thought-provoking dialogue. Readers also are privy to the inner monologue of the protagonist, Anda, a teenage girl who plays the fictitious game, *Coarsegold Online*, through an avatar named Kalidestroyer. Readers join Anda as she navigates the online and offline worlds. Through Anda’s gameplay, readers see two sides to her gaming experience: her confrontation with insidious bullying and her development of friendships; the latter includes Anda helping fellow gamers who truly are in need of assistance outside the game.

When the book begins, Anda has just moved from San Diego, California, to Flagstaff, Arizona, and she appears to be searching for ways to fit in. Anda

quickly finds a social outlet when Liza McCombs, a top gamer who runs an all-female gaming guild, visits Anda's computer programming class at school and encourages students to join the online guild for the massive multiplayer videogame, *Coarsegold Online*. Through joining the guild and engaging in gameplay, Anda is introduced to the concept of gold farming—the mining of virtual materials in the game world in order to sell them for conventional currency in the offline world. Anda quickly learns of related offline human injustices. Drawing upon multiple online resources, as well as examining the protests planned by her father's union, Anda helps to devise a plan for the Chinese gold farmers—real people hired to sell virtual gold for real cash—and in the process, helps them to escape their inhumane working conditions by inspiring them to plan peaceful protests. Through further communications (that have gone viral), the Chinese players are able to make their demands known to their boss. Liza also becomes aware of Anda's involvement in the anti-bullying movement, and she rewards Anda for her social activism.

Opportunities to Layer Literacies

In Real Life presents a number of layered components. In addition to the combination of images and print text that is typical for graphic novels, the content presents a host of issues, from identity formation to social misconduct to marginalization and exploitation to reflective practice and social justice. Because these authentic concerns bridge the online–offline world in the novel, there are opportunities for readers to consider the porosity of online practices (Burnett & Merchant, 2014) and contemplate:

- the universality of social issues;
- the ability to effect change on and off the screen; and
- the role of the avatar and/or the (re)creation or extension of identities.

Simply questioning what is happening “in real life” can help students begin to contemplate the artificial boundaries that separate online and offline practices. Doing so also opens the discussion to larger social issues, and teachers can weave in historical and/or current events that address oppression and social action, as well as peer pressure and ethical deliberations. As seen in the graphic novel, online gold farming was

intimately tied to an offline sweatshop gaming environment. Anda's choice to blindly follow others in the slaying of gold farmers and her subsequent realization of their life and work conditions bring to light social and economic dominance, peer pressure, and, eventually, self- and peer-empowerment. The latter surfaces only when social barriers (e.g., us versus them) are punctured.

Additionally, the title, *In Real Life*, offers opportunities for readers to question, “What is *real*?” Too often, conversations of online–offline practices involve the terms “real” and “virtual.” Such a distinction is underscored initially in the graphic novel through the juxtaposition of Anda's nonathletic, unkempt appearance and timid disposition with Kalidestroyer's fit physique and assertive nature. As with many videogames, players can often achieve online what they are otherwise unable to offline, including social interaction, physical feats (e.g., achieving snowboarding jumps), and the assumption of alternate identities (Abrams, 2010; Gee, 2007). Despite these and other distinct differences between online and offline practices, as *In Real Life* suggests, there can be a close—if not immediate—connection between the online and offline world. As such, Doctorow and Wang's text helps to blur boundaries between online and offline spaces and presents educators and students opportunities to address the reality of social issues that permeate adolescence and plague individuals worldwide.

Looking to the classroom, we suggest that *In Real Life* can support the layering of experiences that enrich understandings. This includes returning to the novel for inspiration. When Anda learns of the working conditions faced by Raymond and his colleagues, she proposes a solution based on the events occurring around her; she watches on television how her father's local workers' union self-advocates, and she draws upon multiple online and offline resources to help Raymond plan a protest against his work conditions. Anda layers experience with agency and social action. In many ways, Anda's story can help adolescents consider how they build upon their experiences and how they are participants in a world beyond themselves, both online and offline.

To layer literacies in the classroom, students need:

- . . . opportunities to be agentive, collaborative, and creative as thinkers who could use multimodal texts to support their

individual and collective evidence-based interpretations. Similarly, teachers must remain open to exploring available resources and reworking and remixing lessons to ensure that students have a range of options and opportunities to be creative, thoughtful, and inspired learners (Abrams, 2015, p. 110).

Incorporating texts, such as *In Real Life*, and engaging in discussions of the online–offline connection can enable students to reconsider their own pursuits, question intentions, and engage in critical thinking about interest-driven and socially, economically, and/or politically imbued actions. In this process, students build upon their existing knowledge and layer resources and expertise that extend beyond classroom boundaries to engage online and offline with local and international communities. Teacher oversight and guidance should support student-driven, collaborative, and critical discoveries. The thought-provoking title, *In Real Life*, summons adolescents and educators to examine participatory practices and meaning making in online and offline realms and to consider how issues and actions can be “real” across multiple, local, and global contexts.

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I Wanna Be Rich

The Bronx . . .

Mack doesn't go to school anymore. He finishes his busboy shift and heads home. His dog is dead, poisoned by his neighbor. Mack kicks in the neighbor's door and beats the man to death.

This is a scene from a book. I'm reading it to half a dozen young men in a non-secure detention facility not far from Yankee Stadium. Non-secure means fewer locks. Come night, the kids go to group homes. "Mack was right, right? We're not talking about the law. We're talking about justice. Who's with me?" I ask.

Hands rise, the debate begins. We agree on two things: 1) Mack is going to pay. 2) How much depends upon the story he tells the judge: "I did what I did. What else can I say?" That gets him twenty-five to life. My friends are silent, then angry. It's just not fair, they say.

The word-for-word is long gone, the faces and places have blended over the years, but I'm sure the dialogue that morning began the way it always does: "First person who guesses my favorite story wins a very cool prize."

"What's the prize?"

"It's better than sex or maybe even pizza. Let's go, gentlemen: the greatest story ever."

"*The Bible.*"

"Nice, but just now I'm thinking of another one."

They yell TV plotlines, movies, video games, lyrics. The quiet kid says, "My story." Now everyone's quiet.

"And what's your story?"

"Where's my prize?" Call him Domingo.

"In the palm of your hand. It's your future. You own it when you know the best story is yours. What's your dream?"

The big talker—Kenny—jumps in. "I wanna be rich."

"I want you to be. How do we get you there?"

"Basketball."

"Beautiful. I need your help—maybe. C'mere."

"Nah."

"Stand with me. Stand tall. Good. You just grew four inches. I like you, your vibe, solid. Now, I work for Nike."

"I thought you wrote books."

"When I'm not recruiting folks to promote this street ball tournament I sponsor. I need someone to work the concrete, tell everybody about the MC's coming to call games, the celebrities signing autographs, the jerseys, sneakers, bracelets I'm giving away. The ladies especially I'd need you to reach out to. Where the ladies go, the fellas follow. We have to fill those seats. The pay's okay."

"How much?"

"Hundred a day. Look, if you put your heart into this, I'll double your salary to help me promote my other tournaments. You mind traveling to California, Hawaii, Australia? You'll get plenty of court time, too. We play while we talk business. You'll meet NBA players, scouts, college coaches, people on the marketing side. Imagine getting paid to hang out on Facebook and talk up what's hot. Lots of jobs in the game. Mine gets your foot in the door. When I was your age, I was a dishwasher and then a cook, and now they pay me to cook up stories."

“When you’re not working for Nike.”

“I’d like you to work with me. Here’s the problem: Lots of folks want this gig, but I only have one spot. How do I pick who will do the best job for me?”

“Interviews.”

“This is your interview. Why should I hire you over everybody else?”

“Why? I just like basketball, I guess.”

“Guessing scares me. I need to know.”

“I *love* it.”

“So does everybody else.”

“But I *play*. I’m *good*.”

“I need great. The one with the best story wins. What’s yours?”

“My *story*? I don’t know.”

“You do. It’s nothing but a skill, storytelling. It’s practice. You can get good at it. You have to. We all do. It’s life or death. No story, no money. Give me you—your dream—in two minutes, and you’re gold. Keep it simple. What does every story have? I’m thinking of three things.”

“Simile.”

“Simi-what?”

“Simi *lee*. Miss K told us. Like when you use like. Like, she floats all soft in my dreams like dandelion fuzz.”

“I love that. That’s a window into your soul, what you said. Before we put in windows, let’s build the house. Three things. Beginning?”

“Middle, end.”

“What’s your favorite memory, playing ball?”

“Lots. I don’t know.”

“Who’d you like to shoot with most?”

“My brother.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Because that was the only time he was for real.”

“Real.”

“He smiled. He forgot. His teeth were wrong. Crooked and broke on the left side. His front tooth looked like Florida.”

“Florida.”

“My mom’s boyfriend was a punk.”

“Stick with your brother. You two are tight.”

Shakes no. “He’s gone.”

“Okay. I’m with you. I feel sorry for you. Here’s the thing: I feel sorry for everybody. Make me feel

hope for you, and I’ll remember you. Let’s say you win this job. Where are you twenty years from now? Who are you?”

“Good.”

“Good?”

“Good father to my son. Good to my family.”

“House, apartment? Where you all live?”

“House. House.”

“Where?”

“Eastchester.”

“Definitely. Two-family, right? You live up top, rent out the bottom to cover the bills? Where you working?”

“I’m hustling the tournament, like you said.”

“No. You’re an authority now. You have wisdom. You’re running the tournaments.”

“Your job?”

“Not anymore. I’m playing golf by then. I better be.”

“Maybe I’m coaching, like at a camp.”

“That’s exactly what you’re doing.”

“Or maybe I’ll be a dentist.”

We wrap up, and it’s time to grab a bite with the teachers. Tap on my back. Domingo: “They said I could eat lunch with you.”

“Then let’s eat.”

“Petroleum engineer. You asked my dream before.”

“I happen to be an admissions officer for Texas A&M.”

“You have a lot of jobs.”

“Moving target’s harder to hit. You in two. Let’s go.”

“Energy. Where I come from, I didn’t see a lot of it. Folks were stuck. When I did see something moving, I followed it. Direction didn’t matter. They sold crystal in my building. They were moving up, I thought. I started as a spotter; then I stole a bag and a car and went to sell the shit in Hunts Point. I was eleven. Had to sit on my backpack to see over the wheel. I forgot to bring toll money—that’s how I got pinched. I control my energy now. I read all the time. I have perfect grades. I’m going into college with a plan, math and science. I’m finishing in three years. Summers I’m working for the biggest energy company

that will take me. I'll do whatever. You want me to work a truck? Love to. Need me in the office? I'm there for you whenever I'm not sleeping, and if you have a cot for me, I'll sleep there, too. Maybe you'll pay my way through graduate school, and I'll give you my next ten years. The company is my family, around the clock. Then, and I'm telling you up front, I'll have my own company. I need to run things, nice and steady. You have to plan ahead. Think before you drill. As a petroleum engineer, I find energy. I control it. That's my beginning, middle, end. So?"

"You thought that up just now?"

"My IQ is crazy high, no offense. I'm gonna be rich, right?"

"Crazy rich. I have zero worries about you. Can I offer you just a touch of icing for the cake? The end, when you're running your own company—you're hiring folks. That's what makes you rich. The way you feel knowing that you're giving twenty people jobs, folks like you maybe, who got a rocky start in business."

"Pretend I'm a good dude, you're saying. Give back. Make the world a better place."

"The world is where I live. You want to make my house nicer? How can I help you? Also, when you do good, you make me look good, picking you for my school. I pick enough of you, that's a promotion, money in my pocket."

"What if I'm just doing it to make the most bank I can?"

"Lie."

"I can do that."

"You tell that lie enough, I bet you start to believe it yourself. Domingo, if you keep laying down that story the way you did just now, you'll win every scholarship out there."

"I already got tuition covered. Won a settlement that pays out when I turn eighteen."

"Yeah?"

"Got myself hit by a car. I limp a little, but I get by."

"Once you get this petroleum engineering thing going, I have a second job for you."

"I'm listening."

"You should write books."

"How much does it pay?"

Manhattan, highly selective private school . . .

"What's your dream?"

"Oncology." Call her Kate.

"Why?"

"Why? My father's an oncologist."

"Mine taught English, and I can barely diagram a sentence. That doesn't keep me from running Harvard Medical School in my spare time. For every thirty people who apply, I let in one. Kate, you're the one. You just have to tell me why."

"Why I'm the one?"

"Ever know anybody with cancer?"

"Yes."

"Somebody close?"

Nods, wet eyes.

"Whatever you're seeing right now? Write it down, scene by scene. Zoom in for a close up, a detail that symbolizes how powerless you felt. How empowered. Maybe you're looking out the hospice window. You haven't slept for days. Is the sun setting or rising? This is how your story begins. End it forty years from now, in your prime, with the people you're helping. The middle is the people you'll comfort and save on the way. Pack all that into two minutes, and there's your ticket to a premed program."

Nods, writes and writes and writes so fast.

Brooklyn . . .

They all have individualized education programs, and their hopes are just as varied. They want to be singers and nurses, electricians and vet techs, day care providers, army specialists, wedding dress designers. One wants to be a cop, but Internal Affairs, so she can bust cops. They've written them down, these dreams, and now they're reading them to each other. This giant of a kid, call him Ray, reads, "I know you all think I am retarded. I'm just shy. But I listen to you, and I want us all to make our dreams be real. I am going to design video games. I'm-a get rich and make it so my moms doesn't have to work. I love gaming because when I play, it's the only place they let you be free."

Wet eyes all around, but why? I missed something. I look to Ms. M, Ray's teacher. She whispers that Ray hasn't spoken until today. Now Ray is falling apart, and I have to be a hard ass, take him aside. "Stand tall. Pull your shoulders back. What are you, six-four?"

"Three."

“Stop crying. Breathe. Good. Bring it home.” He does, and he wins cheers and applause. This lights him up. “I’m the man,” he says. “I’m the man.”

Orlando . . .

Call her Elisette. She’s been scribbling away while the rest of us were talking. End of the workshop, she asks for a word. “Can you read this? I mean like now?”

It’s a poem called “My Friend Ana.” I’ll paraphrase in case the poet wants to publish. Nobody ever sat next to Elisette on the bus, until this new girl Ana came along. Ana was quiet, such a good listener, always there for Elisette. They became inseparable.

By the time it hits me she’s writing about anorexia, she’s shaking. “Stand tall. Breathe. This story has a happy ending.”

“How?”

“You’re an amazing writer. You have a ridiculous amount of courage. You’re one-in-a-million. I have zero worries about you.” I tell that lie every time I do this. “Let’s go see Ms. F. She’s gonna help us get the help we need.”

“I don’t want to be friends with her anymore—Ana. She’s messing me up.”

Melbourne...

“What’s your dream?”

“To live like you do.”

“Out of a suitcase?”

“Like an artist.” Call her Steph. “I want to be an actress.”

“You already are. Say it.”

“Can I read you my story?” She takes out her phone. “Wait, you probably don’t like *Twilight*.”

“I love it.” (Especially since my agent sold it.)

“I was born the day Bella died.” She remembers the movie theater sound wasn’t great. You really had to listen, and everyone did. The house was silent as Kristen Stewart gave up her last breath, and Steph realized she wasn’t breathing either. That same day, she did a Web search on, “How do I become an actress?” She has acted in plays.

“I happen to be a casting director for the movies. Your acting is great, but so is everybody else’s. Why should I give the part to you?”

“I want to be famous, okay? I want to be totally rich. But even if that never happens, I have to keep acting. When I’m not acting, life feels fake.”

Brooklyn, secure detention . . .

“What’s your story?”

“Ask somebody else.” Brandon.

“I’m asking you.”

“Okay, it’s like this: I’m going to hell.”

“Look at me. You’re not going to hell.”

“Shut up, man. I shot some jelly head nigger in the face. I executed somebody. Nobody cares what happens to me. That’s my story. Now, tell me where the fuck I’m supposed to go with that.”

I have some ideas, but Brandon’s not up for hearing them just now. He slams his fists on the table, and he’s out of there with more ways to yell fuck than you’ll hear in *Goodfellas*.

Another young man, Kevin, says, “My court date’s next week. I’ll try that ‘you in two.’ Say I go home and get some money. Why should I buy your book?”

“You shouldn’t. Get your books from the library.”

“Then what are you selling?” he says.

Good question. This is one of those days I feel like I’m hustling some second-rate Svengali act that makes a kid remember when all he wants is to forget.

After, I walk for a bit and end up at my grandmother’s house. She died a long time ago, and so did this ramshackle old rental, boarded up, bulldozer food. I sit on what’s left of the back porch steps and crack a beer. I don’t have a good feeling about Brandon’s story. I think it might end in the middle.

Springfield, Illinois . . .

Another torn-out page of spiral notebook handed to me at the end of the day, but this time the kid runs. I get to it that night at the hotel, interesting bedtime reading: “Dear Paul, I have been feeling it build up lately. Im afraid what the results are going to be. Afraid that Im going to do horrible things and throw away everything I’ve workd so hard for. A’s and B’s is my grades. But holding the anger in has been causing anxiety and hate, towards everyone that is blind about the real world.” And there’s: “I want a odd feeling to kick someone in the face and not stoping, I want to show them my rage, I want Them to bleed.” And: “I dont want to just beat someone into the sack of shit they are. My mom doesn’t care as long as I dont kill them.” And: “Im sorry about the hand writing I have a small form of type of dyslexia but I havent really looked into it and Im a horrible speker. Help me find

a way to cope with it. My name is (Joe Smith),” and then he gives his home address.

I have to rat him out, of course. I email the letter to Ms. D, the lovely media specialist who invited me to Joe’s school. And she really is lovely: when she emails back, she doesn’t say Joe will get the help he needs; she “promise(s) he will get the help he deserves.”

With my email to Ms. D, I send a message for Joe, praising his bravery, his writing, the honesty there, the beauty in that. I ask him to understand why I had to forward his story to Ms. D, that she will partner him with someone trained to help him channel his passion and talent, that his remarkable courage will bring him remarkable opportunities.

I won’t hear from Joe, or about him. His situation is medical. Confidentiality laws keep me from learning how his story ends. That’s how it is with most of the kids I meet. I’m with them for a visit, maybe two, and then I’m gone. Sometimes they send letters, but right after the workshops; there’s not enough time in between to see how their stories are playing out, to see if Kenny is letting the game take him to that house full of family in Eastchester or if Domingo is any closer to striking black gold. If Kate’s in med school or if Ray’s still the man, designing the next Call of Duty. If Steph is on her way to the big screen, if Elisette and Ana are

still friends, if Kevin’s story persuaded the judge to assign him to an alternative-to-incarceration program. If Brandon is . . . if Brandon is. And then, every few years, I do get a glimpse of the next chapter.

Manhattan . . .

In my neighborhood, 181st Street is go-to shopping. I’m hurrying in and out of stores, knocking things off the list. A guy behind a counter knows my name, asks if I know his. Call him Shawn. He comes around to say hi. I met him years before in one of the facilities. He looks terrific. What a smile. “You in two,” he says. He hugs me. I feel it, a happy ending, the beginning of the sequel. Maybe it only happens once in a while, but once in a while is enough to make a man rich.

Paul Griffin wrote the YA novels Ten Mile River, The Orange Houses, Stay with Me, Burning Blue, and Adrift. A middle grade novel, Travelers and Magicians, comes out in 2016. He loves working with Behind the Book (behindthebook.org) and Literacy for Incarcerated Teens (literacyforincarceratedteens.org). Visit Paul at paulgriffinstories.com.

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Sign My Cast

It's been a year since author Ned Vizzini jumped off the roof of his parents' apartment building in Brooklyn, ending his life at age 32.

After the shock of hearing this news wore off, I started to feel something else, which surprised me: frustration.

I knew Ned. I knew he struggled with depression. But the reason Ned and I got along so well was that he counseled me through the loss of my girlfriend Tawny, also by suicide. So I wondered, in vain, about how this precocious young man, who had so much to offer me during my devastating loss, could take his own life. Why couldn't Ned heed the invaluable advice he had given me? And even more upsetting: if Ned couldn't overcome his troubles, how could anyone else?

I was introduced to Ned in a roundabout way. I am an English teacher in alternative public high schools in New York City. I currently teach at a last-chance high school for over-aged and under-credited students. Prior to that, I spent 12 years at Passages Academy, a school program for children going through the judicial system.

Finding texts that appeal to these students and their often-difficult life circumstances is not always easy. (Only *The Outsiders* [Hinton, 1967], *The Things They Carried* [O'Brien, 1990], and *The Gospel According to Larry* [Tashjian, 2001] have recurred each year.) But when my friend Jesse Eisenberg suggested I try *Be More Chill* (Vizzini, 2004) with my students (Jesse was recording the audio book at that time), I immediately found another staple. Ned's endlessly clever story follows a teenage outcast who purchases a technologically advanced, pill-sized supercomputer called a "squip" that offers the protagonist some much-needed guidance and

direction in navigating the cruel hallways of high school. My students loved his book. While still reading an early chapter, one student blurted out to his classmates, "Ned Vizzini doesn't write *about* us, but he does write *for* us." (Ned would later post this quote on his website.)

Through Jesse, I invited Ned to visit the school, and he graciously accepted. Over multiple visits, he spoke about why he preferred ambiguous endings in literature and compared writing to a flag: "Flags have 3–7 colors, not 7,000,000. Only by limiting the color palate does the flag have the chance of being a memorable symbol. There are too many things to write about, but if you limit them, you can then really bring out creativity." He was warm and funny and indulged every question, whether silly (*How much do you get paid?*) or not so silly (*Is the squip supposed to be like a conscience?*). After his first visit, Ned wrote me a letter telling me how he thought that books could be a wonderful form of escape for my incarcerated students. And he commented on what he saw in each of the students—recognition that their current circumstance was only temporary.

In some of his subsequent work, Ned wrote about his personal struggles with mental illness with an openness that is refreshing and unapologetic—as entertaining as it is important. Ned's third book, *It's Kind of a Funny Story* (2006), chronicles Ned's time at New York Methodist's Psychiatric Inpatient Center in Brooklyn. Only after we saw the movie version of *It's Kind of a Funny Story* did Tawny, my girlfriend of 11 months, feel comfortable enough to share with me her own experiences with depression, hospitalization, and thoughts of suicide.

It wasn't long before Tawny voluntarily checked into the NYU Psychiatric Ward. She spent a month there

having her medication monitored to protect her from the potentially dangerous side effects of forgetfulness or purposeful misuse. From visiting Tawny each day, reading Ned's books, and listening to him speak with my students, I learned that depression is a real and life-threatening disease. I found that people (particularly young people) who suffer from depression don't need to be "cheered up" or "fixed" as much as they need to be listened to and assured that they are okay. They need to know that *they* are not the problem, that it is the *disease* that is the problem.

After Tawny checked out of the psychiatric ward, she and I met up with Ned at a writing scholarship event where he and Jesse were on hand to read excerpts from Ned's books. The common theme resonating through Ned's words that night was that human feelings often contain little logic or rationality.

Tawny committed suicide the next month. Ned called me and gave me sober insights into the disease of depression and mental illness, explaining that I cannot blame myself for her death. Unlike most health problems, he said, depression and thoughts of suicide are difficult to diagnose and even harder to prevent, as depression's symptoms show up neither in blood tests nor on X-rays.

Soon thereafter, Ned became another of depression's victims. He died from a disease that, in this day and age, can only be contained and never fully goes away. It's a disease as complicated as it is deadly. As such, it needs more transparency in the social dialogue. During a phone call after Tawny's death, Ned pointed out that, when kids break a bone and have their buddies sign a cast, they wear the cast as a sort of badge of honor. However, with a mind or spirit fractured by depression, there are no casts to sign. There is no boasting of or honor in this injury. There is mainly shame and sorrow and silence.

This hope for a collective transparency surrounding mental illness is something that I have been personally striving for as a way to navigate my own feelings about Tawny, the woman I loved. I am still searching for the language or emotional intellect that might enable me to share my thoughts of a beautiful soul I think about always. Like many of us, my words and abilities of expression are limited—so much so that I am only able to address her loss safely in my writing by exploring it within the context of Ned, a kind man whom I only met a few times.

The disease is never fully in remission, and its sufferers are never cured. As such, no one, not even the sufferer, can anticipate what the disease will bring next. The only thing for sure, Ned told me, is that depression is on the rise, and if the numbers continue as they are, depression will be the second largest killer after heart disease by 2020. Since he passed, more than 40,000 Americans have committed suicide. That's more than the number of annual gun deaths in this country.

Only in retrospect and in the context of Ned's unnecessary death does his advice take on a different meaning. Perhaps Ned was struggling to reconcile his own muddled feelings about his own depression and thoughts of suicide. And in a strange way, his "squip" may have been his own screaming desire for inner-voice navigation, the angel-on-the-shoulder fighting whatever devils Ned must have been carrying inside.

In the letter that Ned sent to me after his initial school visit, he thanked me and my colleagues for fostering a creative and optimistic environment for "people who know that the real world holds promise for them." The sentiment of a hopeful tomorrow is something that depression steals from its sufferers. During difficult times, my students fed off of the hope they saw in Ned. What I didn't realize then was that Ned also fed off the hope he saw in my students. The sharing was symbiotic, and this symbiosis must not stop. Ned's words and his work, his life and his death, have taught me that we must always remind each other that the real world holds promise, no matter how difficult things have become. This is true not only for at-risk students, but for Ned, for Tawny, and for everyone. We must be each other's squips. We must sign each other's casts.

L. A. Gabay is a high school teacher for incarcerated teens in Brooklyn who frequently writes for Slam Magazine and has written numerous scholarly articles regarding education, incarceration, basketball, and sneaker culture.

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