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ASSEMBLY ON LITERATURE
FOR ADOLESCENTS

OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL
OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH



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◆ Volume 43 ◆ Winter 2016 ◆ Number Two ◆



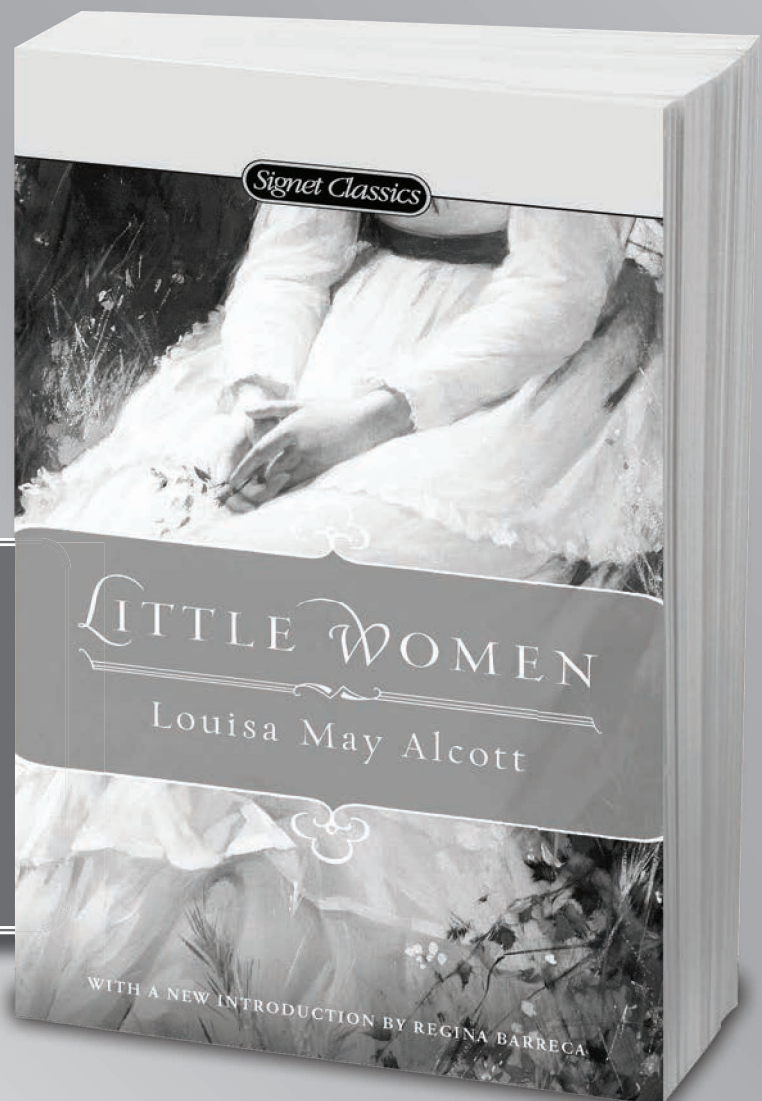
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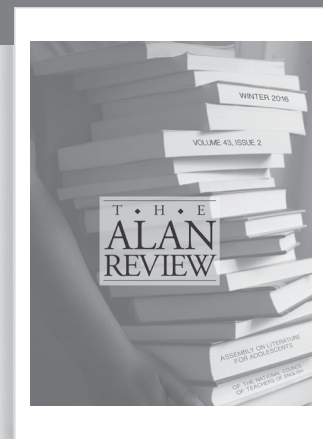
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ALAN
REVIEW

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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

Adolescence and Adolescents: Defining the Culture of Youth

How we conceive of adolescence influences our perception of adolescents. Through a biological lens, we might envision adolescence as an inevitable stage of life in which raging hormones determine behavior. Through a coming-of-age lens, adolescence might be defined by individual self-discovery and attainment of adult norms. Through a sociocultural lens, adolescence might be seen as a socially mediated practice created and shifted by societal expectations and influences. Taken together, these perspectives offer sophisticated and diverse means of defining the culture of youth.

In this issue, contributors invite us to consider how young adult titles (and those who write, teach, and promote them) might offer, challenge, confirm, or critique conceptions of adolescents or adolescence. They examine how authors present the young people they describe—and how readers might respond and do respond to these representations. They critique how educators envision the young people in their care—and how these visions influence how they care for them. And they offer suggestions for using young adult literature to help readers navigate adolescence (as defined through any lens) and work through the complexity expressed by David Levithan and John Green’s teen protagonist: “My face seems too square and my eyes too big, like I’m perpetually surprised, but there’s nothing wrong with me that I can fix” (*Will Grayson, Will Grayson*, 2010, p. 10).

We begin this issue with “Trusting Teens and Honoring Their Experiences: A Collaborative Conversation,” a written dialogue between Laurie Halse Anderson and Chris Crutcher, award-winning authors

known widely and well for the respect they afford their readers as adolescents capable of exploring and examining the complicated world in which we live.

Several articles in this issue reaffirm this adolescent capacity for navigating difficult realities by exploring how fiction can provide spaces that help them work through challenges they face in their lives outside of books. Jan Lower, in her piece “The ‘Necessary Wilderness’: Liminal Settings for Adolescent Emotional Growth in Four Novels by David Almond,” examines the “wilderness” and how unstructured or undeveloped spaces in fiction can serve as powerful features of narrative that have meaning for developing adolescents.

In “Creative Cussing”: The Sacred and the Profane in Rick Riordan’s Mythical Middle Grade Novels,” Genevieve Larson Ford explores how Riordan uses pseudo-profanity in nuanced ways that are both appropriate to and educative for his readership. She argues that his thoughtful decisions about language reveal an understanding of readers’ linguistic development and also engender space for readers’ explorations of various themes, such as freedom of speech and expression, personal responsibility, and social awareness.

And in her piece “Postmodern Allegory of Adolescence: Daniel Handler and Maira Kalman’s *Why We Broke Up*,” Stacy Graber uses her analysis of the postmodern space in which the work is set to argue that Handler both confirms and challenges the commonly accepted view of adolescents as subject to the seduction of media and consumer culture.

Two articles in this issue work together to ex-

amine how application of a Youth Lens might help us reconsider how we—as educators and academics—construct adolescence/nts. Mark A. Lewis, Robert Petrone, and Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides set the stage for considerations of this lens of analysis in their article “Acting Adolescent?: Critical Examinations of the Youth–Adult Binary in *Feed* and *Looking for Alaska*.” By demonstrating how these young adult titles interact with dominant ideas of adolescence/ts, they explore how these texts both critique and re-inscribe normative distinctions between adolescents and adults and examine how such distinctions affect the dynamic between young people and adults.

Michelle M. Falter demonstrates the potential application of the Youth Lens in a classroom context in her article “Addressing Assumptions about Adolescents in a Preservice YAL Course.” She describes a series of innovative activities designed to complicate preservice teachers’ understandings of adolescents and frame their reading of YA titles through these resulting insights.

Relative to our regular columns, Barbara Ward’s “Book in Review: A Teaching Guide” provides teaching strategies and resources for two YA titles: *The Queen of Bright and Shiny Things* (Aguirre, 2015) and *All the Bright Places* (Niven, 2015). Through careful consideration of these texts and the questions they raise, she argues that all readers, despite their unique identities, are products of their experiences, particularly those lived during adolescence.

Guest author Erica Holan Lucci joins Sandra Schamroth Abrams and Hannah R. Gerber in the column “Layered Literacies: Layered Perspectives of Adolescent Literacies.” Erica shares how her dual identity as a teacher and gamer informs her understandings of pedagogy and practice. She describes how teachers can use the world building of the popular videogame

Minecraft to help students deepen their understandings of Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* trilogy (2011–2013).

E. Sybil Durand and Jim Blasingame invite two youth advocates to join the conversation in their column for this issue, “Right to Read: Embracing the Difficult Truths of Adolescence through Young Adult Literature.” Tracey Flores, the director of Arizona State University’s (ASU) youth literacy event, “Día de los Niños, Día de los Libros,” discusses her approach to creating a celebration that honors young people and their cultures, languages, and literacies; Meg Medina, keynote speaker at the event, shares her experience with censorship and the importance of providing readers access to books that embrace the difficult truths of adolescence.

Considerations of censorship and the adolescent reader are taken up further in a thoughtful concluding piece by YA author Ashley Pérez. In her article “Embracing Discomfort in YA Literature,” she discusses the power (and necessity) of discomfort in learning to be better readers, students, and people—and the reality that young people today can handle and benefit from such encounters. She brings our thinking full circle by echoing Laurie Halse Anderson and Chris Crutcher in the reminder that the human experience itself is disconcerting and uncomfortable; stories might be the key to helping adolescents unlock meaning and find connection.

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- Niven, J. (2015). *All the bright places*. New York, NY: Random House/Alfred A. Knopf 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.

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?

Summer 2017: The World of Young Adult Literature

Submissions due on or before November 1, 2016

The world of young adult literature extends beyond the United States. And yet, readers in our nation are not often invited to consider stories published in or written about other lands, cultures, and communities. While the United States is rich in diversity and the field is increasingly recognizing the need to share stories for and about all readers, we are a single nation on a globe inhabited by many. We wonder what might be gained from increased exposure to a wider array of young adult literature that lies beyond our national borders. We wonder, too, what challenges exist in finding, publishing, and teaching such titles and how we might address these with care and humanity.

To that end, we invite contributors to consider the stories of adolescence that are written around the globe and to tackle questions related to international literature, both broadly and narrowly defined. What common experiences, realities, and ways of knowing, doing, and being exist across cultures? What differences might reveal our biases—and enhance our understandings? Are cultural differences ever too big to bridge? Whose stories get published—and whose remain untold to a larger community? What role do translators play in telling stories to new audiences? Can literature unite people across distant places? Is it true that “Even when you got crazy people or drunk people on buses, people that went on stupidly, and shouted rubbish or tried to tell you all about themselves, you could never really tell about them either” (David Almond, *Skellig*, p. 13)? Or can story help us know an unfamiliar somebody a bit better? Although “two mountains can never meet, . . . perhaps you and I can meet again. I am coming to your waterfall” (*Edwidge Danticat, The Farming of Bones*, p. 283).

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

Trusting Teens and Honoring Their Experiences:

A Collaborative Conversation

From the Editors: In this article, we are honored to feature a written conversation between Laurie Halse Anderson and Chris Crutcher, award-winning authors known widely and well for the respect they afford their readers as young people capable of exploring and examining the complicated world in which we live. We appreciate the generous response of these authors (and their publishers) and their willingness to engage with challenging, important questions of adolescence and adolescents.

As to process, we generated and sent a series of questions to both Laurie and Chris. We compiled their initial responses into a single document and then sent the compiled version back and forth to solicit questions, elaborations, and revisions until all were satisfied with the end result. We hope our readers enjoy the important insights and playful levity offered in the candid responses of these writers for teens.

How do you define adolescence/adolescents?

Chris: Many of my friends define it as “Chris Crutcher, but a lot younger.” I, however, have a far more mature response. I don’t know about you, Laurie, but to me, the definition of adolescence is more about behavior and circumstance than it is about age. There’s a confused, challenged, first-time quality to it that makes it intriguing to explore and write about. It’s a time when the rational brain is almost there but not quite, so struggles with adults (whose rational brains are supposed to be devel-

oped) become intense. The electric quality of that time, along with the emotional risk level inherent in the decisions adolescents are asked to make, keep me interested.

Laurie: I think it is less about behavior and more about circumstance. A flexible age range (flexible within reason, say up to age 25) is a critical component for me. When I see 40-somethings acting out in typical adolescent fashion, my response to them is quite different than it would be if they were 17. So my definition is the time period after childhood and before adulthood characterized by massive biological, intellectual, and emotional changes.

A more poetic definition is this: the fragile, liminal period during which heart, soul, and mind attempt to unite. When those three components fail to knit together properly (into what we call “integrity”), you wind up with a confused and sorrowful adult.

I like what you said about the “electric quality of that time,” Chris. That intensity is what makes adolescence so profoundly incredible and hellish.

In the media and elsewhere, what stereotypes persist in portrayals of adolescence/adolescents?

Chris: It’s getting better, I think, but for a long time, a significant number of teenage movies played off the impulsiveness of teenagers—and in a far too

simplistic way. Some of them were funny, and there's something to be said for hyperbole, but there wasn't a lot of balance. I think that's changed in the movies, but I think there still is some sense among a lot of adults that teenagers are impossible to understand or that they can't be reached. I think the more we understand that adolescence is a time of becoming and we force ourselves to remember our own becoming, the better chance we have of making connections.

Laurie: There is a lot of lazy screenplay writing in storylines that have to do with teenagers. Film and television constantly sell them short, which is frustrating. I think some of this is done hand-in-hand with the needs of advertisers, who are hungry for the money in teens' wallets and desperate to establish brand loyalty with them. This exploitation is most heinous when it manipulates adolescents' need to belong and their insecure, confused sense of identity.

Other mainstream media don't do much better. The recent *Time Magazine* (2015) list of "The 100 Best YA Books of All Time" showed an appalling lack of understanding about the definition of "young adult literature" (the list includes books like *Charlotte's Web* and *Mary Poppins*), as well as a near total disregard of books that have non-White characters in lead roles. Irresponsible journalists too often reach for stereotypical representations rather than dig under the surface of the story. All of these misguided accounts of the adolescent experience make it hard for our culture to understand, and properly love and support, teens.

Do you explicitly challenge deficit perspectives of adolescence/adolescents in your writing?

Chris: I don't know your intentions, Laurie, but I know you challenge deficit perspectives all the time. When I use examples of your stories in my presentations, I always get a big, positive response; the kids who love your books do so because you "get" them. I hear that sometimes about my own work. I don't set out with the intention to make that challenge, but it happens when I do due diligence on my characters. In other words, if I work

hard to know them, they will be knowable to the reader.

Laurie: Give me a sec, I have to look up what "deficit perspectives" means. . . .

OK, I'm back. Thank you for introducing me to a new term!

My only intention is to write a good story and not to pull out all my hair in the process. I think the stereotypical, disrespectful way that adolescence is typically characterized in our culture makes any well-written YA book a challenge to these deficit perspectives.

Thanks for the kind words, Chris. I shamelessly drop your name when I feel an audience slipping away from me and I want them to think that, if they don't like my books, maybe they should pay a little attention to what I'm saying because I know you. Works like a charm.

How do your readers respond to your representations of them?

Chris: For me, almost always gratefully.

Laurie: My favorite thing to hear from readers is that they appreciate the honesty in my books. Chris, they love your books for the same reason. There is a direct cause and effect between the way teens positively react to the honest portrayals of their worlds in our books and negatively react to the frequent misrepresentations of those worlds in mainstream media that we discussed above.

Does the journey through adolescence contain elements of universality that cut across gender, race, ethnicity, class, and culture? Is this journey complicated by the complex interplay of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and culture?

Chris: Yes, the journey cuts across all those things, and yes, it is complicated to the max by those things. Human development—brain and biological development—cuts through every difference. Remember, humans are more like apes than dolphins are like porpoises, so all humans are almost exactly alike in structure. However, a significant portion of

the machinery that runs us is related to our sight, so we are prone to seeing differences that might not be there.

There are certainly big differences between the sexes. I used to marvel at the title of the book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (Gray, 1993) because I thought it was too conservative. My idea was, you should travel to the Hubble Telescope, point it one direction, look as far as you could see, and there would be men. Then turn it 180 degrees and look as far down that way as possible, and there would be women.

You don't have to watch the news for more than a couple of minutes to know the complications that exist between and among earthlings because of race, ethnicity, class, and culture. Those differences have the power to end us. And we have to be careful how we depict them, because the reader is just as important in the story process as the writer. I remember, Laurie, you reading the manuscript of my novel *Period 8* (2013) and warning me that the dialect I used for an African American character was too stereotypical, and you were right on the money. In my mind, he was a school-smart, street-smart kid with a unique perspective on things. But the dialect alone obscured that. Those differences are ones we must always pay attention to in our storytelling.

Laurie: The journey through adolescence is the journey of discovering your soul and seeking out kindred spirits. That is unchangeable across culture or time period. The journey is complicated by every aspect of the human experience, but I think that being surrounded by family and institutions that do not understand the challenges of adolescence is the greatest complication of all.

How do you as authors (and how might readers) navigate adolescent sexuality in your books?

Chris: I tend to not be too graphic because I believe the imagination of the reader can do most of that work. I remember my imagination, and I didn't need a lot of help. At the same time, if you're writing a story about adolescence and you don't include issues of sexuality, front and center, you're

missing a big part of that time. It's a little like writing a story about a scuba diver in Death Valley.

Laurie: Teens are rather aware of the drives and mechanics of sexuality. I like exploring the situations in which sexual activity (ahem) arises and the choices that characters make when navigating those situations.

What made (or might have made) your personal transition from "adolescent to adult" easier? Could it/can it be found in/nurtured by story?

Chris: Number one, it's not supposed to be easy, so nothing could have made it easy. That said, any time I heard or saw or read a story where a character close to my age struggled with the same things I was struggling with, I felt relief. It empowered me. As teenagers, we do need to know it gets better, that there will be a time when we get to take better control. A well-drawn character can be a best friend. Again, Laurie, I can't tell you the number of girls I've run into who said that when they read *Speak* (1999), they felt huge empowerment. And the other side of that is the number of boys who got a quick education from it. *Twisted* (2007) did the same thing in really unique ways.

Laurie: There's a good chance that I would not have lived to age 21 if it hadn't been for the fiction section of my high school library and the patient and kind librarians who let me read there. I was looking for examples of what I was going through. I rarely found it, because there weren't many books like that in the library. I settled for the second-best option of getting lost in fantasy and science fiction. That was good enough to get me through the most dangerous years. If I hadn't gone to the library, I would have spent a lot more time getting high and doing dumb things.

What I needed then is what I try to provide in my stories now: examples of people caught in hard situations. Sometimes they make good decisions, and sometimes they make disastrous decisions. Readers get to experience those decisions and their consequences through the safe medium of Story. They can draw their own conclusions about what

they read. If it's a story that connects with their hearts, they often will wrap the wisdom they take from it into their own bundle of real-world knowledge.

It's fascinating to me, Chris, that we both hear teens talking so often about each other's work! The characters in your books have become the friends of countless teens I've talked to. What these kids appreciate more than anything is finding characters who are feeling what they are feeling. Your books make teens feel less alone.

What role do you think teachers and librarians can/ do play in adolescents' search for identity?

Chris: Learn to listen, withhold judgment, and don't take adolescent rebuke personally. And hook them up with stories, whether they are in print form or any other media. Everybody's looking for connection. This is an old theme for me, but when a teacher or librarian hears a kid use so-called bad language and feels like they have to make a big deal of it, they're taking themselves off the short list of people to turn to. As an adolescent, I want you to hear my story in its native tongue, in my language, and respect the story. That doesn't mean I expect you to let me talk like a soldier under fire in the classroom. There's no reason not to call for decorum and civility. But don't get crazy about it.

Laurie: Look them in the eye, smile, and respect them. So many adults have let them down monstrosously by the time they get to your library or classroom that all of their defenses are on Red Alert. Love them enough to give them time to get used to you. They have to trust you enough to lower their shields in order to open themselves up to the rich literature you want to share with them.

As you consider the YA field and its depiction of the adolescent experience to date, what's working and what's missing?

Chris: I'm not a student of the genre, really. What I've seen is there is a little bit of everything in YA literature—some of it written well, some of it written not so well. What's working, in my mind, are the connections made between stories and kids,

connections made evident by teachers and librarians—in spite of potential uneasiness—willing to expose kids to stories that ignite their passion. What isn't working is the idea that it's more important to teach the so-called classics to more advanced students than it is to teach current YA literature. The two can fold in on each other and make both better. You can't make me a lifelong reader and you can't really connect me to a character if you have to explain it all to me after I've read it. You can engage my intellect that way, but not my psychological/emotional/spiritual self. Balance is what we need.

I love kicking this stuff around, Laurie, and particularly with you. You are such an articulate student of the game.

Laurie: I can think of a lot of teachers and librarians who are better equipped to answer this question! From my limited vantage point, I'd like to see more translations of YA written in other languages and set in other cultures. Teens are incredibly curious and very open to learning about kids whose lives are not like theirs.

This has been super fun!! Thanks so much for letting me hang out with you, Chris!

*Laurie Halse Anderson is a New York Times bestselling author known for her sensitivity and willingness to tackle difficult topics. Her work has earned numerous American Library Association and state awards. Two of her books, *Speak* and *Chains*, were National Book Award finalists. Her most recent novel, *The Impossible Knife of Memory*, was long-listed for the National Book Award. Laurie was the proud recipient of the 2011 Free Speech Defender Award, given by the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) and presented to her by Judy Blume. She also received the 2009 Margaret A. Edwards Award given by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) division of the American Library Association and the ALAN Award from the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English (ALAN). You can follow her adventures on Twitter (<http://twitter.com/halseanderson>).*

Chris Crutcher's years as a teacher in, then director of, a K-12 alternative school in Oakland, California, through the 1970s and his subsequent years as a therapist specializing in child abuse and neglect inform his 13 novels and 2 collections of short stories. He has also written what he

calls an ill-advised autobiography titled *King of the Mild Frontier*, which was designated by *Publisher's Weekly* as "the YA book most adults would have read if they knew it existed." Chris has received a number of coveted awards, from his high school designation as "Most Likely to Plagiarize" to the American Library Association's Margaret A. Edwards Lifetime Achievement Award. His favorites are his two Intellectual Freedom awards, one from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the other from the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC).

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The “Necessary Wilderness”:

Liminal Settings for Adolescent Emotional Growth in Four Novels by David Almond

From the earliest folktales to modern classics like *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963), *Julie of the Wolves* (George & Schoenherr, 1972), *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 2007), and even the musical *Into the Woods* (Sondheim & Lapine, 1989), storytellers have sent their characters into wild, uncivilized places to confront the challenges and inspire the introspection that cause them to grow and change. Educators know the value of being in an unstructured outdoor environment for students of all ages. Forest Kindergartens in Switzerland have inspired a school in Vermont to hold every Monday of Kindergarten outdoors (Hanford, 2015), and in Washington, DC, an innovative community health program called DC Parks Rx issues written prescriptions for time outdoors to children and adolescents in urban schools—a program that has taken off in other major cities (Sellers, 2015).

At a 2010 conference on literature for young people held in Toronto, Ontario, the British author David Almond gave a talk stressing the importance for children and adolescents of having access to wild places in life and in stories. Entitled “The Necessary Wilderness,” the talk was later published as an essay in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (Almond, 2011a). As described in that issue’s introduction, his speech proposed that “even in the center of civilization and technological prowess, children seek out spaces that evoke atavistic wildness and danger” (Russell, Westman, & Wood, 2011, p. v). In a speech accepting the 2010 Hans Christian Andersen Award, Almond (2011b) urged the same point: “Children themselves are still part wild and not quite civilised and still driven to explore the

wilder fringes of the world and of their own minds. Children are in flux, in a process of change, of discovery and exploration” (p. 78).

In his coming-of-age novels *Skellig* (2000b), *Kit’s Wilderness* (2000a), *Heaven Eyes* (2002), and *The Savage* (2008), Almond puts his conviction into practice, creating settings with real and metaphorical wild spaces and wildernesses that are central features of the narratives. In each story, his adolescent protagonist, between the ages of 10 and 14, seeks out or encounters these liminal spaces, all of which have an element of the magical or fantastic, and there confronts and explores his or her fears, losses, and desires. As a result of these experiences, each comes home with greater self-understanding and a new capacity for connection and joy.

Almond’s concept is compelling. While adolescence is a time of self-exploration and boundary stretching, in an urban and cyber-oriented world, access to an unstructured or undeveloped space in which to explore and imagine is hard to come by for many adolescents, and they lose the opportunity for emotional development that such liminality affords. But because research on the psychological impact of literature has shown that readers can and do internally model the feelings of the characters they encounter in fiction (Keen, 2006), teachers and librarians can provide a needed experience of real and metaphorical wildernesses in narrative fiction by recommending these novels and designing reading experiences that include them. This study examines Almond’s settings and the impact they have on his characters’ emotional

growth, suggesting that they can be powerful features of narrative that have meaning for developing adolescents.

The Challenge of Urbanization and Google Maps

The effectiveness of unstructured space in providing an opportunity for self-knowledge is a fundamental tenet of wilderness challenge and therapy programs, where adolescents can spend time alone “to reflect on

their lives and to receive insight and inspiration” (Russell, 2001, p. 74). But outside of such programs, wilderness experiences can be difficult for some teens to access. The United States Census Bureau determined that in 2010, 80.7 percent of the US population lived in urban areas (US Census Bureau, n.d.). Nabhan and Trimble (1994) argue that “an increasingly large proportion of inner-city children

will never gain access to unpeopled places . . . [or] wildlands. They will grow up in a world where asphalt, concrete, and plaster cover more ground than shade-providing shrubs and their resident songbirds” (p. 11).

In her study of adolescent development, Hersch (1999) found that some young people felt even suburban life is stifling: “We’ve never touched anything real” (p. 344). But the wilderness feels real. “That’s a big thing about moving off to the woods. You can actually live your life” (p. 344). The boys profiled by Hersch dreamed about living in the woods—which was “not about dropping out or goofing off, but about seeking life’s meaning” (p. 344). The idea was not to leave forever, but to come back to share insights learned in the wild. “The trick is to establish a rhythm: you come back to civilization as long as you can stand it, and then you return to the wilderness” (p. 345–346). As Nabhan and Trimble (1994) suggest, “[B]eing *in* the thick of it . . . is the best way we can be in touch with ourselves” (p. 107).

Even an opportunity to head to the wilderness

is not the adventure it used to be, however. Where topographical or large foldout paper maps were once the norm and charting a course into the wild took imagination and courage, digital mapping has become the preeminent form of navigation and self-location. Garfield (2013) believes that “a large sheet map offers a perfect way to register where we have come from, where we are going, how we get there” (p. 378). But Google Maps has a different purpose—to demystify mapping. In a June 2012 speech described by Garfield, Brian McClendon, head of Google Maps, took on the classic “*hic sunt dracones*”—here be dragons. “Our goal at Google has been to remove as many dragons from your maps as possible” (p. 431). And on a digital map, people often search first for their own town or house, which Garfield calls “Me-Mapping, the placing of the user at the instant center of everything” (p. 429). He notes:

It is now entirely possible to travel many hundreds of miles . . . without having the faintest clue about how we got there. A victory for GPS, a loss for geography, history, navigation, maps, human communication and the sense of being connected to the world all around us. (p. 384)

A loss, too, for the concept of wilderness. In a culture in which it is possible to always know exactly where you are (and designers of technology are determined to take the mystery out of even the most remote wild places), young people must try harder to discover and experience liminal, unstructured landscapes or settings in which to explore and imagine.

Almond’s Realistic Settings and the Fantastic Real

The writer Janet Burroway suggests that the setting in a narrative can, among other things, serve as a mirror for emotion. She notes that, besides defining a story’s physical dimensions, “setting must do more than one thing at once, from illuminating the story’s symbolic underpinnings to . . . reflecting emotion or revealing subtle aspects of a character’s life” (Burroway, E. Stuckey-French, & N. Stuckey-French, 2011, p. 165). In the novels discussed here, the wildernesses Almond creates specifically reflect the protagonists’ emotions. The settings, while strange and magical, are close to home—within walking distance and easily visited, sometimes daily. This structure is significant to Almond:

I think kids—and all of us—need to expose ourselves to danger and to trouble and kids know that they want to do that. . . . They want to go just over the horizon where it's a bit wilder. I mean, they need to know that home is nearby, but when exploring the unknown they want to feel as though they're a long way from home. (Richards, 2002, para. 8)

The landscapes in these stories, both home and wilderness, are realistic. As Almond has explained (Richards, 2002, para. 5), they are all set in places that he knows well and could actually show a reader. But Almond's stories are not what would be considered purely realistic fiction. In every setting, a subtle magic happens, helping to create the wild atmosphere of the liminal space.

While Almond's novels have been categorized as belonging to the genre known as *magic realism*, they may more accurately be included in the genre *fantastic realism*. Waller (2009) suggests that in magic realism, the impossible happenings are incorporated into the narrative world in a way that all the characters find natural or acceptable. She proposes that in fantastic realism, on the other hand, the fantastic is not an experience shared by the community, but appears specifically in the experience of the teenage protagonists, "in their own diurnal world, often within their own person" (p. 72). She notes that the experience of the magical is isolated: "It is thus how the *individual* interacts with the *fantastic* that is most significant in . . . teenage fantastic realism" (p. 55). In these novels, the events that take place in the liminal spaces emphasize the individual, rather than a societal, experience of the fantastic. In each of Almond's narratives, the magic is experienced by the protagonist and just one or two young friends (or siblings, or enemies) who share the transcendence, the doubt, and the joy. Only two grown-ups experience it, and in both cases (the mother in *Skellig*, 2000b, and the dying grandfather in *Kit's Wilderness*, 2000a), they themselves are in an in-between situation, an anxiety-filled suspension between life and death.

Almond himself does not categorize his work as belonging to any genre. Asserting that his books are realistic and not fantasy, he explains that while his novels are set in a very real world, that world may contain more than meets the eye: "I suppose what they do maybe tend towards is to show how extraordinary the world *can* be" (Richards, 2002, para. 7). He says: "Actually this world is miraculous. If you look

at certain things in this world, it's actually amazing what's in this world. . . . I think our world's got everything we need" (Odean, 2001, para. 23).

The Wildernesses of Almond's Coming-of-Age Novels

Skellig

In *Skellig* (2000b), Almond creates two metaphorical wildernesses located in buildings, perilous spaces to which entry is forbidden: one is a decrepit garage, and the other is an attic in an empty house. The events that take place in each are transformative to the protagonist, 10-year-old Michael, and both spaces serve as a reflection of his internal state as he changes: the garage invokes feelings of death and giving up, and the attic reflects his desires—new life, resurrection, and hope. As the narrative begins, Michael's family has just moved. Unhappy about the transition, Michael descends into near-despair when his sister is born prematurely and with a defective heart. So afraid the baby may die that they do not even name her, Michael and his parents are deeply uncertain, and Michael feels paralyzed.

The garage is at the end of the garden; ramshackle and dangerous, it is the story's first liminal space. Almond creates it through an accumulation of sensory details. It is "a demolition site or a rubbish dump" (p. 1); the roof is rotten, and the floor has cracks and holes. The space is full of spiders, desiccated insects, small dead animals, and trash—rotting cloth, carpet, bags of cement, water pipes, rolls of cracked linoleum, ancient newspapers and other detritus, all stinking and covered with dust. There is no order; it cannot be used for its intended purpose. The garage is between life and death, between the past and nonexistent future.

Forbidden to enter, Michael dares himself and crosses the threshold. He finds what appears to be a half-dead man—bony, arthritic, and filthy—whose name we later learn is Skellig. Michael starts caring for Skellig, discovering wings on his back. He realizes that his baby sister and Skellig both lead marginal existences; his sister clings to life, halfway between heaven and earth, while Skellig clings to life without a past or future.

Through his friendship with his neighbor Mina, Michael is introduced to the other wilderness—an

empty house soon to be renovated. Mina takes Michael to the bare attic, open to the sky through a window. Wildlife lives there—a fierce family of owls with healthy babies, full of life, a symbol of Michael’s desire. This is also a liminal space, but one of energy and hope. It houses babies that will soon take flight, and in time, it will become a real home. After Michael has seen the attic and the owls, hope begins to grow in him for himself and for Skellig. Michael tells Skellig about his fragile sister and asks him to think about her getting better, hoping this will help her. Skellig agrees, and soon Michael brings Mina to meet him. The two move Skellig from the garage to the attic; he is so light they can carry him. They realize he is not old, but young and beautiful. As soon as they reach the house, Skellig tells them his name, thereby regaining his identity. In the attic, they see his wings unfurl for the first time. One can be one’s self and find one’s desires in this more hopeful metaphorical wilderness. Skellig’s resurrection and Michael’s healing begin.

Mina and Michael return in the middle of the night to find a strong, tall Skellig standing at the window being fed by the owls. Together they dance, their feet lifting off the floor; Michael and Mina suddenly have transparent wings and experience a momentary fusion with Skellig, who is warm, reassuring, and tender. When Michael’s hopes and fears come together as his sister has an operation on her heart, Skellig goes to the baby in the hospital, dancing with her in a similar way. They give each other “glittering” life and strength (p. 166).

The last time Michael and Mina see Skellig in the attic, they repeat the transformative dance. Skellig finally answers Michael’s question about what he is: “‘Something like you, something like a beast, something like a bird, something like an angel.’ He laughed. ‘Something like that’” (p. 167). Skellig draws the liminal experience to a close, telling them: “Thank you for giving me my life again. Now you have to go home” (p. 168).

Michael and Mina do go home. During one last attic visit, they find the baby owls fledging—and a heart carved in the floor with a thank you from Skellig. The attic is just an attic once more. At Michael’s home, contractors knock down the garage, and a garden takes its place. His fears are gone; his desire has been achieved. He is transformed by his experiences in the two wildernesses, which, having served their purpose,

no longer exist in the same way. Like Skellig, who could say his name when he reached the metaphorical wilderness of hope, Michael’s sister has healed to the point where he and his parents can name her: Joy.

Kit’s Wilderness

There are four wildernesses in *Kit’s Wilderness* (Almond, 2000a), three places in the landscape around Kit Watson’s village and one that Kit creates from his imagination, inhabits in his mind, and describes in a story that he writes. Similar to those found in the other novels, these wildernesses reflect the inner psychological states of Kit and the other main character, John Askew.

Kit is a 13-year-old who has moved with his parents to his ancestral village to care for his ailing grandfather, a former miner in the coal pits nearby. Kit has three desires: to make friends; to find his identity; and to understand death. He has two fears: that his grandfather will slip into dementia and die, and that the artistic, troubled village boy, 13-year-old John Askew, who challenges Kit but with whom Kit feels a connection, will destroy himself.

The first wilderness is a meadow-like space near the village, a neutral place where children play. It covers old mining tunnels where Kit’s ancestors worked and sometimes died. This everyday wilderness has magic: Kit’s grandfather, and eventually Kit and John, can see the flickering shapes of ancient pit children who were buried there in accidents. Here Kit learns about the part of himself that is deeply connected to the past. The second wild place is a deserted coal mine where adolescents from school play Askew’s terrifying game called Death; in this game, the chosen player “dies” and is left alone in the darkness. Kit wants to play Death, desiring to “see what really happens” (p. 41). His experience is transformative: he blacks out, but then sees the ghosts of the ancient children.

The third wilderness in the novel comes from Kit’s imagination. He writes a story that unfolds in a wild landscape during the Ice Age (p. 106). It tells of a boy his age, Lak, who rescues his baby sister from a bear, then searches through the frozen wilderness to find his family again. Kit inhabits the story in his dreams, and Lak’s mother begs Kit to find Lak and the baby and bring them back. When he wakes, impressions from stones given to him by Lak’s mother are

on his hand; the wilderness has broken the boundary between worlds (p. 132). In real life, Askew has disappeared, and Askew's mother wanders the meadow, the ordinary wilderness, with her baby, looking for him. She begs Kit to help bring Askew back (p. 157). Kit realizes he is writing the story of Lak for Askew: Lak never loses hope of finding his family, and Kit holds the same hope of reconnecting with Askew and saving him. The Ice Age wilderness—though the most savage and unforgiving in the story—is a wilderness of hope.

To reach the fourth wilderness, Kit struggles through snow and cold to the distant entrance of an abandoned mine. Inside is a narrow tunnel with a cave-like area beyond, ominous and threatening. Askew, waiting there, characterizes the space as Death; in a way, both Kit and Askew have disappeared from the world. It is primal and liminal, suspended: "Down here . . . there's no day, no night. You're half awake and half asleep, half dead and half alive. You're in the earth with bones and ghosts and darkness stretching back a million million years into the past" (p. 185). But it is also a space for truth, for ritual and resurrection. The fantastic enters: the ancient mine children and Lak's mother appear. Kit sees Askew as Lak and tells him the story; Askew draws strength from the tale. This wilderness represents hope, life, and determination.

Together these four wildernesses enable Kit to achieve his desires and conquer his fears by providing liminal spaces for the learning he wants and needs to do. They are complex, vivid reflections of Kit's emotions. Almond gives them a numinous quality, including in these spaces the fantastic events of the narrative. Ultimately, the pits are boarded up, no longer needed. Kit and Askew return home, transformed, to their families and a happy life.

Heaven Eyes

There is only one wilderness in *Heaven Eyes* (Almond, 2002), but it is as compelling as any that Almond has created. Erin Law is a young teen who has lived in a group home for orphans since her mother's death. Erin's desire is to find a happy emotional connection like the one she had with her mother. Deciding to leave, she sets off on the river that runs through the city with another orphan, her best friend January. Taking along Mouse, a younger boy, their transport is

a raft that January has constructed from cast-off doors marked, symbolically, "Entrance," "Danger," and "Exit" (p. 37).

The ride on the river is initially free and joyful, but it ends quickly when darkness falls and the young people run aground on the Black Middens, a trash-filled outcropping adjacent to an abandoned printing plant and a derelict warehouse district. Mired in stinking, oily mud, Erin, January, and Mouse are found by a girl with webbed fingers and toes who speaks in a poetic cadence and syntax. She is Heaven Eyes (p. 56). The wilderness in this narrative is the muddy shore, the warren of warehouses, and the printing plant, with its shattered skylights, giant machines, and rubble and typeface on

the floor. Heaven Eyes lives there in squalor with the ancient, mentally unbalanced former caretaker, whom she calls Grampa. Their lives are marginal. They live as they would in a true wilderness, foraging and excavating, as if they were far away from civilization.

Erin is immediately drawn to Heaven Eyes and connects deeply with the atmosphere of the Middens, but to January, the place feels like a nightmare—mad, evil, and death-like—and he believes that if they do not leave soon, they will never get away (p. 97). To return to the orphan home would thwart Erin's desire, however, and Heaven Eyes does not want to leave the only place she has ever known. When Erin and January starkly disagree, Erin's internal state suddenly reflects the Middens. Disconnected and disoriented, she gets lost in the darkest part of the ruined building, a cellar full of rot and slime (p. 103). Heaven Eyes saves her, calls her back to life and the world, and their connection solidifies.

Through hidden evidence found by January, they learn that Grampa has withheld from Heaven Eyes her history as the sole survivor of her family's nautical disaster, and they confront Grampa. Then January and Erin find the decades-old preserved body of a workman in the mud of the Black Middens (p. 163). They

Together these four wildernesses enable Kit to achieve his desires and conquer his fears by providing liminal spaces for the learning he wants and needs to do.

decide to lay him out, honoring him with typeface that spells out “The saint” (p. 166).

Hearing heavy machinery and walking through the derelict buildings to find the source of the noise, Erin sees a crane and realizes that construction crews will begin to raze the buildings on the site the next day (p. 172). The wilderness, so mysterious and potentially lethal, will be civilized by new construc-

tion. At the end of his purpose, as the wilderness is doomed, Grampa dies. In a mystical scene, the saint rises up gracefully and escorts Grampa’s spirit across the mud and into the river (p. 181). Heaven Eyes is free to leave with Erin.

Back at the orphans’ home, the four friends realize with surprise that they can see the Black

Middens from the windows. The wilderness has been about time and truth and the construct of reality, a nearby space for learning and not an escape to a distant haven. The presence of Heaven Eyes, known at the orphans’ home by her real name, Anna, brings everyone closer, and she and Erin consider themselves sisters. Erin achieves her primary desire for connection and is happy.

The Savage

In this short, metafictional story of loss and healing narrated by the protagonist, Blue Baker, Almond creates two parallel wildernesses. The first is Burgess Woods, a lovely, bucolic site outside Blue’s town where a ruined chapel stands; the other, born from Blue’s unconscious and an objective correlative for Blue’s grief and anger, is a different Burgess Woods, dark and fearsome. This second wilderness appears in the story Blue writes called “The Savage,” and there the savage lives in a cave under the chapel (Almond, 2008, p. 7).

After his father dies suddenly, leaving him with his mother and younger sister Jess, Blue has two desires: to feel less grief and to vanquish the town bully, Hopper, who mocks Blue for grieving. When the school counselor only makes Blue feel worse, he

begins to write about the savage, a split-off part of himself, a creature that can contain Blue’s rage and grief and be invulnerable, which Blue cannot. The writing of the story is therapeutic, and one day, “without really thinking about it” (p. 31), Blue puts himself into the story and dreams he is with the savage.

Blue writes that the savage leaves the wilderness for town. The savage recognizes Blue’s house with positive feelings, then breaks into Hopper’s home intending to kill him. But Blue cannot make the savage kill Hopper in his story. Instead, he writes that the savage terrifies Hopper, punching him and splitting his lip, and dances in triumph in the street (p. 60). Then, before returning to his cave in Burgess Wood, the savage breaks into Blue’s house and gently caresses his sister on her brow. From that point on, the narrative is infused with magic. The injury to Hopper’s face and a dirt smudge left by the savage on the sister’s brow are real. Empowered, Blue confronts Hopper and tells him he knows the savage hit him and that he will send the savage again if Hopper does not leave him alone. The confrontation brings him the first of several experiences of joy (p. 66).

Then the wilderness in Blue’s story, representing both his unconscious and his imagination, and the actual ruined chapel in Burgess Woods come together, and Blue is healed. In school, he is overwhelmed with the experience of writing his story, and, becoming savage-like, grunting and growling, he runs to the Woods and to the ruined chapel (p. 68). There he sees the savage “like a reflection, and he was just like me, only weirder and wilder and closer to some magic and some darkness and some dreams” (p. 73). Deep in the cave, Blue is astonished to learn that the savage has been painting Blue and his family, including his dad, on the cave walls—in “works of wonder” (p. 75)—since before Blue began writing him. Together they grunt and stomp, and Blue knows “how it felt to be the savage, to be truly wild” (p. 75).

In a transcendent moment in this spiritual space, the savage touches Blue, and the reintegration is complete: “Somehow I knew that my wounds would heal, that my sadness would start to fade, and I knew as well that somehow, in some weird way, everything that was happening was true” (p. 76). Together they hear Blue’s father telling him to be happy and that he’s with him always. Suddenly, Blue is outside the cave and can’t find his way back in, because he

The wilderness has been about time and truth and the construct of reality, a nearby space for learning and not an escape to a distant haven.

no longer needs the wilderness or the savage. He is changed, and they will never meet again. He returns to his mother and sister, and laughing together, his mother declares: “Here’s the savage come to life in the real world” (p. 77).

Across these novels, David Almond shows adolescent readers a way to imagine for themselves a wilderness space not far from their homes in which they can explore and cross thresholds in order to grow. His home-away-home structure is a classic one for such transformations. As Bridges (1980) notes:

The transition process is really a loop in the life-journey, a going out and away from the main flow for a time and then a coming around and back. . . . The isolated person returns from . . . the wilderness to set about translating insight and idea into action and form” (p. 149).

Or, as Almond (2011a) describes the classic story structure, “you go out into danger, and you come back home again. You keep going out, and coming back home again” (p. 111).

Almond emphasizes that young people need not go far to find an unstructured place where they can have insights or discover something valuable about themselves:

I often explore with kids in schools the notion that there could be a garage like Skellig’s in their own surroundings, a coal mine like Kit’s, an attic like Mina’s. And I do see their eyes widen. A new sense of possibility seems apparent—possibilities for their own writing, but also for their own thinking/imagining. Perhaps they look at their day-to-day “ordinary world” with new eyes. (D. Almond, personal communication, April 4, 2013)

Almond’s Narratives Model Growth and Transformation for Adolescent Readers

Even if no wilderness is easily available to them, simply reading literary fiction can give adolescents an opportunity to experience the feelings they are reading about and to extend the exploration in the narratives to their own lives. Research by the novelist and psychologist Keith Oatley (2011) supports his hypothesis that, when reading fiction, readers create a model or a simulation in their own minds of the experience in the narrative. He suggests that we go beyond just an emotional response or even an interpretation of a narrative when we read. Instead, Oatley states, “We create our own version of the piece of fiction, our own dream,

our own enactment. . . . We run a simulation on our own minds. As partners with the writer, we create a version based on our own experience” (p. 18).

Oatley (2011) grounds his theory on brain research that has shown that when humans hear (or read) and understand a sentence involving the making of an action or movement, areas in the brain concerned with hearing and language are activated—but so are the areas of the brain that are specifically concerned with the neural signals necessary to make that movement. Applying this research to the experience of reading, he concludes: “The researchers in this study describe reading as a process of simulation, based in experience, and involving being able to think of possible futures” (p. 20). Preliminary research in five other studies also demonstrates that reading literary fiction in particular increases readers’ abilities to detect and understand others’ emotions (a skill known as Theory of Mind) and enhances interpersonal sensitivity, because it forces the reader to engage in mind-reading and character construction and to develop more flexible interpretive resources (Kidd & Castano, 2013).

This simulation process and the reading of literary novels may be particularly effective for supporting the emotional growth of young readers. Discussing research on the adolescent capacity to sympathize with fictional characters, Sklar (2008) suggests that a sympathetic emotional response can be formed when two necessary events occur: first, observing a situation, and then forming a judgment about it. Reading is, by its nature, observing others in a narrative. Sklar theorizes that because adolescent readers imagine themselves as invisible witnesses to the action in a narrative, they can process and experience narrative texts in ways that are similar to real-life situations. Citing the value of “emotional intelligence,” or a capacity to understand and apply emotional experiences within

Even if no wilderness is easily available to them, simply reading literary fiction can give adolescents an opportunity to experience the feelings they are reading about and to extend the exploration in the narratives to their own lives.

the context of one's life, Sklar proposes that novels enhance adolescent growth by providing "absorptive experiences" (p. 492). Because adolescent development includes an increasing "ability to conceptualize and apply experience, including experiences that take place while reading fiction," adolescent readers can draw implications from novels and stories that earlier would have remained purely on the level of experience (p. 493). By identifying more empathetically with others, adolescents can expand their experience and increase the potential for who and what they can become.

Potential Implications for Educators

The fantastic realism and the evocative wildernesses in these novels suggest that there are opportunities for group and individual classroom activities for readers that go beyond more structured lesson plans for these texts (of which there are many available); these activities have the potential to engage adolescents, enrich their reading experiences, and encourage personal discovery. Given the sometimes emotionally tentative nature of adolescent readers, these novels can offer reassuring, structured opportunities for reflection and self-recognition.

Pre-reading Activities

- Since the concept of wilderness varies among readers based on personal or shared history and may include environmental, spiritual, cultural, emotional, ecological, and recreational associations and values, personal definitions or qualities of a "wilderness" could be developed in small groups or written reflections, then shared.
- Students can be introduced to Almond, his novels, and the landscape of northern England, where "magic is all around," through his articles and interviews describing his keen sense of place, as well as accompanying photographs.
- Fantastic realism can elicit a number of responses in a classroom, from connections with very personal experiences to a struggle to engage imaginatively with the text. A whole-class introduction to fantastic realism as a genre could be followed by small-group discussions (with voluntary sharing) of individual experiences in realistic or familiar places that have perceived elements of the fantastic, such

as a thunderstorm in the woods, a landscape after a blizzard, a magic space from childhood, or being physically lost while alone. Alternatively, students could write about those experiences using sensory details. As Erin says in *Heaven Eyes*: "The most extraordinary things existed in our ordinary world and just waited for us to find them" (Almond, 2002, p. 194).

Post-reading Activities

- Students could write, in role, about the emotions felt by the protagonist or another character during a selected scene in one of the wilderness settings.
- Students could discuss or write about the fantastic qualities of one or more of the wildernesses in the novels and their effect on a character or characters.
- As a group, students could list the words used by Almond in the sensory description of a wilderness from any of the fiction described in this article. They could then each write a poem using those words.
- In *The Savage*, Blue writes a story in which he turns a familiar landmark into a wilderness, a wild place. In their local area, students could create and describe a wilderness—a park, a woodland, empty buildings, or a secret place in a landmark that is otherwise well-known. How do they get there, using only general topographical descriptions (no street names, no Google Maps)? What is it like? The description of the wild space must be realistic and include details experienced by all five senses. Why would they go there? Would they add fantastic features that could break the boundary into real life? What would those be?

Conclusion

The wilderness settings in Almond's novels provide a rich opportunity for adolescent readers to explore and to imagine possibilities for themselves. By simulating in their own minds a version of the wildernesses that appear in Almond's novels, or by conceptualizing and imagining the experience of being in a similar wilderness, adolescent readers can not only share Almond's protagonists' experiences in the liminal spaces in the novels, they can also apply those experiences to their own lives. We, as teachers, librarians, writers, and mentors can recommend these books to adolescents

or even include them in our schools' language arts curricula. We can provide students who may not have access to a wilderness with, if not a physical liminal space, then a fictional one for their imaginations to explore, to give them a different kind of chance to discover what is within. As Almond has said about his readers: "They want to know what lies beyond the ordinary façade. They want to know what might really lie inside themselves. They want to strike out for the wilderness. And books can help take them there" (Almond, 2003, p. 18).

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“Creative Cussing”:

The Sacred and the Profane in Rick Riordan’s Mythical Middle Grade Novels

Ideologically, childhood is viewed pervasively as a sacred, idealized, timeless, innocent, even mythic space. This social construct is reflected in the ways that gatekeepers often maintain boundaries around what is considered acceptable content for younger readers (e.g., Coyne, Stockdale, Nelson, & Fraser, 2011; Shanahan, 2007). In contrast, adolescence and young adult literature has traditionally been the place where those boundaries are tested, where risqué language and content may be deemed an important part of the maturation process as the teenager struggles with authority (Trites, 2004). However, arguments about whether YA is becoming too dark for the average adolescent (see Alexie, 2011; Gurdon, 2011) and debates in the media surrounding frequent adult readers of adolescent novels (see Graham, 2014; Howlett, 2015; Rosenberg, 2014; Wolitzer, 2014) intimate that young adult literature may be becoming even more adult in content. Current YA literature generally does not buffer readers from taboo topics, if it ever did, and it may present readers with realistic, sometimes vivid portrayals of profanity, sex, abuse, death, drugs, and rebellion against authority (Campbell, 2007; McClung, 2012).

Readers do not usually transition immediately from books that avoid taboo topics to those which revel in them. The middle grade novel, therefore, exists as a critical limbo space where adult topics are mentioned, yet are handled with delicacy, evasion, and circumlocution. For middle grade writers and publishers, this requires balancing the demands of verisimilitude and the anxieties of age appropriateness

(Birdsall, 2013; Rosen, 2014). Middle grade novels carve a plot between the sacral space of childhood and the boundary-testing, authority-challenging blasphemy of young adulthood. This article will look at examples from one of the most successful middle grade novelists, Rick Riordan. By creating humorous pseudo-profanity, Riordan appeals to what he sometimes calls the “immature” humor of his young readers and manages to capture what seems to be one of the most important developmental tasks of this age: learning to balance self-expression and freedom of speech with personal responsibility and social awareness.

The Contexts of Code-Switching and Cursing Avoidance

In an essay about the importance of knowing your audience, Riordan blogged that after writing adult mysteries for ten years, the main stylistic choice that shifted when he debuted writing for middle grades with *The Lightning Thief* (2005) was that he left out profanity. He says:

My prose hasn’t changed much since my adult mystery writing days, except for being curse-free. . . . But I do write with a middle grade sensibility. . . . I write for the middle grades for the same reason that I taught the middle grades so many years. I know those kids. I relate to them. I get their sense of humor and I understand what they’re looking for (I hope) in a story. (2013, January 1)

While it is debatable whether Riordan did or did not make other linguistic and content switches when imagining a new, younger audience, what is salient

here is the question of cursing, or rather, the creative avoidance thereof in books for middle school readers. Just as writing for children is conceived simultaneously, almost subconsciously, as a sacred trust and a subversive medium, Riordan approaches the sacred stories of various cultures with both mild irreverence and a deep respect, and he treats his middle grade subjects the same way. The use of offensive language in middle grade novels remains more controversial than that in novels for teenagers; therefore, authors often self-censor, drawing upon ideologies that assume that children and middle readers need at least a modicum of protection from “adult” subjects and language. Even though in some linguistic contexts using profanity is normative, in order to be considered full members of society, teens of all ages must learn the appropriate contexts for their expressive vocabulary. They need to learn to code-switch between formal and informal uses of language, and skillful novelists such as Riordan may provide models of ways to communicate in officially sanctioned and formal ways while amply allowing for humor, creativity, and self-expression.

The use of profanity by adolescents, although common, is still a behavior that especially younger teens need to learn to control and use in suitable contexts. Aitchison (2006) argues that as early teens experience a surge in vocabulary size, they “are learning how to adjust their language to the world(s) they live in.” Aitchison calls the skill of adapting language to differing linguistic contexts “appropriacy” (p. 20–21). Coyne, Callister, Nelson, Stockdale, and Wells (2012) investigated profanity in adolescent literature and state that most uses of profane language by adolescents are considered a socially unacceptable problem behavior. This reminds readers of YA novels that “profanity is included in several child or adolescent problem behavior checklists” and that when profanity is utilized “with the intent to hurt others it has been identified as a form of verbal aggression” (p. 361).

In her controversial essay about YA literature, “Darkness Too Visible,” Meghan Cox Gurdon (2011) theorized that “foul language is widely regarded among librarians, reviewers, and booksellers as perfectly OK, provided it emerges organically from the characters and setting rather than being tacked on for sensation But whether it’s language that parents want their children reading is another question” (para.

19–20). Two decades ago, Caroline Hunt (1996) contended, “Many books that speak directly to the adolescent experience use language that some adults do not like . . . children’s books do not always involve *obvious* taboos, but the YA ones generally do” (p. 228).

Undoubtedly, the issue of whether or not those subjects labeled taboo by critics, educators, politicians, and sociolinguists are allowable in books for adolescents is not as simple as either Gurdon or Hunt would paint it, and the use of more explicit content in schools still causes raging censorship battles. The Supreme Court wrote in *Bethel School District no. 403 vs. Fraser*, “It is a highly appropriate function of public school education to prohibit the use of vulgar and offensive terms in public discourse” (First Amendment Center, 2015). Most schools have policies about the use of offensive language,

although these policies are not always practicable to consistently enforce in hallways, and although teens are likely to hear and employ a wide variety of offensive language between classes, school texts are always liable to scrutiny (see National Coalition Against Censorship, n. d.; Center for Public Education, 2006).

Timothy Jay (2007), a premier psycholinguistics researcher on cursing, believes that the ability to assess situations in which to use language that society considers profane is a maturation skill. Since “language values clearly vary from one community to another” (para. 1), it is difficult to gauge how well middle school students understand “the etiquette of swearing.” In a related work, Jay and Jay (2013) say that preteens are still learning the necessary sensitivity “to contextual or pragmatic variables (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity, social status or occupation of listener, social occasion, physical location) that constrain taboo word use” for adults (p. 473). It isn’t until children

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learn to “intellectually appreciate the impact of language on listeners and can empathize with them” (2007, para. 8) that they learn to evaluate which situations are appropriate for the use of taboo words.

Teachers often become the arbiters of district and school policies regarding profanity and may be caught in the crossfire in episodes of profane language usage

in textbook selections, student written work, or classroom discussions. According to Jay’s (2007) research, it is useful for educators and anyone who deals with children’s media to be aware of these categories of offensive speech and the various situations they might encounter. He delineates these different categories

of offensive language and demonstrates that each type of language “represents a different speaker intention”: “name calling, insulting, profanity, slang, vulgarity, obscenity, epithets, slurs, and scatology” (para. 4). Developing the language skills to appropriately navigate various social and academic settings while preparing for adult roles can be challenging. This involves continually increasing demands on a person’s vocabulary, but it also involves learning the contexts in which to use certain types of language. Jay (2009) reminds us, “We all grow up in a culture in which we have to learn which speech is appropriate and which is offensive in a given situation” (p. 91).

When it comes to profanity, this need for awareness of socially acceptable behaviors becomes even more apparent. Early adolescents may struggle to find ways to express themselves, but they might find models in fiction. Bandura and Walters (1963) theorized the importance of imitative models in the influencing of behavior and include textual models such as books. They argue that “the provision of models in actual or symbolic form is an exceedingly effective procedure for transmitting and controlling behavior” (p. 51). This influential social learning theory argues that the media children and teens consume likely affects their behaviors. Middle grade writers have the potential to influence their readers by modeling appropriate contexts for profanity use.

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A number of writers have reflected on the issue of profanity in their blogs or have spoken out in interviews, but few have systematically described their thought and writing processes. Parry (2013) categorized the options that writers have in her essay, “To #%&* or Not to #%&*: Profanity in Fiction.” She considers the question, “Do you need swearing to sound authentic when writing for teens and adults?” She determined that:

The issue is balancing authenticity with respect for your audience. Everybody encounters profanity; it is a language intensifier and can be useful in conveying the weight and reality of your character’s situation. And yet it is the nature of profanity to offend, so any use will have consequences in how the book as a whole is received. (para. 2)

Parry gives an example of ways that offensive language may affect reception, stating that middle grade books that include profanity will get shelved with the young adult titles. “On the other hand,” she says, “excessive swearing in any adult or YA books can come across as clichéd or amateurish” (para. 2). She reflects on the five different ways she deals with “an opportunity to use a swear word” (para. 2) in her novels. She may: 1) omit the word altogether; 2) reduce the amount of swearing a character may use; 3) evade using profanity; 4) substitute creative insults instead; and occasionally 5) commit to using profanity “when the first four choices are wrong for the voice of the character or the gravity of the situation” (para. 3–7). Musing on the same subject, Russell-Williams (2010) argues that swearing in children’s and young adult books “used to be pure anathema,” but now “it’s probably easier to get away with a cuss word in a children’s book than it is on the news.” She points out that going at rudeness obliquely, while being cautious about using invented profanity, is still probably the best way to go. That’s where creative avoidance of profanity becomes effective.

Riordan Models “Creative Cussing” Avoidance

Rick Riordan’s avoidance of most types of offensive language in his middle grade novels offers an interesting case study. A former teacher, he is cognizant of both the various ideologies used to define his readers and the adults who select, promote, or challenge his books. He has repeatedly claimed a pedagogical pur-

pose in the instigation and continuation of his Percy Jackson series (2005–2009), which began as a way to motivate his son, who has ADHD and dyslexia, to engage with reading, and which Riordan also utilizes as a forum to teach readers about the myths from Greek, Egyptian, Roman, and Norse mythology. His interest in the welfare of his readers elucidates much of his motivation for self-censorship.

At the same time, if Riordan completely avoided taboo language, it might restrict his characterizations and realism (verisimilitude being one of the main arguments behind including controversial elements in books for middle grade or teen readers). Instead, he has turned this self-restriction into an asset. Like many other middle grade writers, Riordan exercises a modicum of self-censorship due to audience concerns. He models for his readers some ways to expertly avoid cursing while occasionally finding humor in skillfully manipulating language; this generally results in avoiding offensive language as a weapon against peers, but inserting it during life-and-death moments of extreme duress. He scaffolds methods of using language in socially acceptable ways by demonstrating often humorous and skillful ways *not* to curse (see Bright, 2013).

Language Has Nearly Divine Power

Riordan portrays early adolescents as heroic, powerful, yet self-conscious and awkward individuals who accomplish super-human tasks, including gaining linguistic maturity. He clearly expects his readers to be capable individuals and to accomplish their own super-human tasks along with the characters, such as recalling the names of dozens of mythical monsters, heroes, and gods. Along the way, he successfully balances ideas of the sacred and the profane, of reverence and irreverence, of prayer and sacrifice employed by his most heroic characters, contrasted with the blasphemy and curses in which the more negative characters indulge. This is true in both the mythic sense and the linguistic sense. There is a playful attitude toward modern profanity, as well as blasphemy against the Hellenic and Egyptian pantheons; however, boundaries are drawn. Disrespect is dangerous when those you are disrespecting are godly beings (and, in some cases, teachers at school).

Also, in Riordan's tales, oaths aren't just flip-pant phrases; they may be solemn promises made to the powers that be. In fact, curses may be more than

just taboo language that sometimes causes listeners emotional harm; they may also be magical incantations that can cause bodily harm. Riordan's first book, *The Lightning Thief* (2005), includes a caveat that it won't deal with the religious or spiritual directly: "God—capital G, God. That's a different matter altogether. We shan't deal with the metaphysical" (p. 67). However, Riordan's characters do learn to deal with the existence of "great beings that control the forces of nature and human endeavors: the immortal gods of Olympus" (p. 67). Language in Riordan's novels literally has power to invoke the wrath or the blessings of the gods (or the junior high school principal) and is far more than a symbolic representation; Riordan's version of potent cursing originates in the power of language to curse or bless in ancient Greco-Roman and Egyptian religious ritual and myth (see Faraone, 2005; Frankfurter, 2005).

Understanding the proper use of language is only one of the skills Riordan's heroes demonstrate; his characters learn that names have power, and words are the language of creation. Predictably, as adolescents, the main characters aren't always reverent about their relationships with the gods. For instance, the young Egyptian magicians use the sun disks on statues of Ra as basketball hoops, and Percy Jackson has a tendency to do impertinent things like ship Medusa's severed head to Mt. Olympus. The relationships between Riordan's protagonists, children of the Olympians or the Pharaohs, are reminiscent of the relationships between adolescents and any authority figures. The Greek gods in *The Lightning Thief* are portrayed as the ultimate deadbeat, absent parents. It's unsurprising, then, that the demigods in the story teeter between respect for their parents' godly powers and frustration and anger over their distance.

The creative cussing techniques that Riordan invents are part of that careful balance between reverence and irreverence. I use the term "creative cussing" in part because Riordan has been known to use the phrase himself, but also because when his characters

He models for his readers some ways to expertly avoid cursing while occasionally finding humor in skillfully manipulating language[.]

curse, they speak in euphemisms rather than actual curses or other forms of profanity. In *The Throne of Fire* (2011), part of Riordan's Kane Chronicles

The adult content is muted without insulting the intelligence of the middle school reader.

(2010–2012) series dealing with Egyptian mythology, the teen magicians are at the Brooklyn museum attempting to collect an artifact that could save the world from total annihilation when they encounter an obstacle in the form of a major protective enchant-

ment. The narrator reports: "I muttered an Egyptian curse—the cussing kind, not the magic kind" (p. 21). In this case, the profanity is muted twice: first by it being in a different language, and second because the "cussing" is summarized rather than directly reported. A hint of a joke can be seen in the connection between magical curses and profanity, as well, which makes the mildness of the language function more as an intelligent choice made by the narrator, rather than an uncomfortable restriction.

Riordan's characters already seem to understand when certain types of mild profanity might be socially acceptable and that name calling could harm others, but they allow for mildly rude nicknames as a form of middle school bonding (e.g., Seaweed Brain, Wise Girl, Chicken Man). None of the protagonists use racial epithets, and when bullies or more serious enemies use epithets, it is done off-stage. Taboo language is toned down or elided, just as some of the other "mature" content is modified to make it middle school appropriate. A striking example of this is when the riotous god of wine, Dionysus, is on probation as director of the demigod camp, and he is forced to drink Diet Coke instead of wine. This and the centaurs who get tipsy drinking root beer become a few of the many gags in the story where the bawdy Greek myths are modernized, but not exactly bowdlerized. The adult content is muted without insulting the intelligence of the middle school reader. Profanity is similarly modified to satisfy a sense of realism and propriety simultaneously.

Language Usage Reveals Character

For writers, an important part of characterization is deciding how different characters will speak as a

means to distinguish them from each other. Along the way, writers must decide how these characters will react under the pressure of the plot. Much is revealed about a character's personality, background, and choices by the language he or she uses. For instance, one of Riordan's characters, Leo Valdez (*Mark of Athena*, 2012), ran away from home at an early age and spent much time in the foster system. Instances where he uses mild oaths (e.g., "heck" or "dang") or creative insults are notably higher than those of his peer Frank Zhang, who was raised in a conservative home with a strict Chinese grandmother. Another way that minor characters are painted with broad strokes is through their choice of epithets. A satyr (half-goat, half-man) traveling with the group of Greek and Roman heroes exclaims things like "Pan's pipes!" and "Holy mother of goats!" Conversely, the son of Hades, god of the Underworld, says, "Oh, Styx" or "How in Tartarus?" (swearing by locations in the Underworld), while a Pegasus bellows, "Holy horse feed!" (a more equine oath).

Some of the most memorable creative cussing in Riordan's books is when his heroes use ancient languages to curse. The attraction of swearing in a second language is one that many language learners are familiar with, lending this technique an air of getting away with the forbidden in a relatively safe manner. One of the first instances where Riordan uses this technique is in *Lightning Thief* when Percy Jackson first comes to the camp for demigods. His tour guide, Annabeth, orders a group of bullies to back off by crying, "Erre es korakas!"—literally translated as "Go to the crows!" in Greek (p. 89). Many characters invoke the Olympians by exclaiming, "Di Immortales!" (p. 125), and Percy finds himself speaking in tongues when he spontaneously shouts, "Braccas meas vescimini!" or "Eat my pants!" (p. 166).

Other times, characters make oaths casually or seriously to relieve stress in life-or-death situations or to make promises. More frequently used exclamations, such as "By the gods" or "May the fates forbid," may be complemented with original profanity using Egyptian concepts like "By Ra's Throne," "Thoth's Beak," or "Holy Horus!" In the Greco-Roman stories, "Pluto's Pauldron's," "Hephaestus's Hand Grenades," "Mars Almighty!" and even "Poseidon's Underpants!" represent some of the creative phrases Riordan invented to use in his novels. Many moments of creative

cussing involve humorous homophones. In one scene in *Titan's Curse* (2007), a group of questing demigods reaches Hoover Dam. One character, an immortal huntress of Artemis, uses archaic language and misses the nuances of modern English. She cracks up the rest of the group when she says:

"Let us find the dam snack bar," Zoë said. "We should eat while we can."
Grover cracked a smile. "The dam snack bar?"
Zoë blinked. "Yes, what is funny?"
"Nothing," Grover said, trying to keep a straight face. "I could use some dam French fries."
Even Thalia smiled at that. "And I need to use the dam restroom."
...
"I want to use the dam water fountain," Grover said.
"And . . ." Thalia tried to catch her breath. "I want to buy a dam T-shirt." (p. 208)

In *Son of Neptune* (2011), one character, Hazel, who can control precious gems and metals, uses a large outcropping of semi-precious stone to escape some small demons. She doesn't know the name of the stone she has pulled up from the ground until her pursuers curse the stone for stopping them:

"Schist," said an angry voice from the grass.
Hazel raised her eyebrows. "Excuse me?"
"Schist! Big pile of schist!"
A nun at St. Agnes Academy had once washed Hazel's mouth with lye soap for saying something very similar (p. 215)

Reporting or summarizing the cursing that other characters engage in occasionally becomes an opportunity to provide a few cheap laughs. Percy of *Son of Neptune* (2011) can understand the speech of horses, which results in a translation of only part of what the horse snorts at the group in one particular scene:

Arion nickered.
"Jeez, Hazel," Percy said, "Tell your horse to watch his language."
Hazel tried not to laugh. "What did he say?"
"With the cussing removed?"
...
"This time Arion whinnied so angrily, even Hazel could guess he was cursing.
"Dude," Percy told the horse, "I've gotten suspended for saying less than that." (p. 439)

Readers may find in Riordan's novels subtle reminders that using strong language in front of authority figures can lead to trouble; they may also learn that

while rude language can sometimes help them gain status with their peer groups, using such language in humorous ways works better than simply being crude or abrasive. They will also discover that saving taboo words for stressful situations rather than using them on a daily basis gives them more cathartic power (see also Stephens, 2011).

Riordan appears completely aware of the possible impact his creative cussing avoidance may have on his audience. He demonstrates that avoiding profanity while attempting to create realistic characters and situations requires a fine balance. In *Mark of Athena* (2012), one of his less-restrained characters, Leo Valdez, is initially scornful of his fellow quester Frank Zhang's use of mild epithets: "'Dang it!' Frank barked, which Leo figured was probably severe profanity for him. No doubt Frank would've cursed some more—bursting out the *golly geees* and *gosh dams*—but Percy interrupted" (p. 260).

He demonstrates that avoiding profanity while attempting to create realistic characters and situations requires a fine balance.

Avoiding Oath-breaking, Blasphemy, and Other Social Etiquette

When characters swear oaths, most of the time they are making solemn promises that have dire consequences if broken. For example, if someone swears by the River Styx and breaks it, the punishment can be severe. Oath-breakers, or those who are faithless to their friends, are villains. Similarly, when someone invokes a magical curse similar to those in Egyptian tombs or otherwise calls down godly wrath on someone, the curse generally gets results, as in the exploding donkey curse or the curse for summoning fruit bats. There are even mythical creatures that embody the curses of dead enemies, such as the *aria* in *House of Hades* (2013, p. 227).

It is notable that by far the most commonly used actual profanity in Riordan's books is the use of "Oh, my gods!" as an expression of surprise, annoyance, disgust, fear, or sometimes just as a filler word or phrase. Casual blasphemy that would have been elided or eliminated in nineteenth-century novels has

become a commonplace interjection, almost a nonce word. The plural is typically used to make it contextually appropriate, just as *Hades* replaces hell in most of the characters' exclamations.

It is important to note that the context in which the offensive language or use of an avoidance technique appears can impact their reception. Mildly

It is important for adolescents to learn the social etiquette surrounding taboo words, and Riordan's characters model many of these avoidance techniques.

offensive language may be used to add comic relief to a situation. Insults may be used for social bonding or as weapons, depending on the way they are used. It is important for adolescents to learn the social etiquette surrounding taboo words, and Riordan's characters model many of these avoidance techniques. Educators can have fruitful conversations talking about situa-

tions in which formal and informal language should be used, including slang or insults. However, discussions of profanity in class should be handled carefully. Riordan's work may aid middle school or high school classes in discussions of socially acceptable contexts for various types of language and code-switching, thus helping students learn to move confidently from one language register to another.

Categories of Creative Profanity Avoidance or "Creative Cussing"

In this section, I've categorized a number of ways that taboo language may be avoided in any type of novel, and I've included clarifying examples. It should be noted, however, that Riordan's work does not use every one of these methods. The chart in Appendix A (which contains page numbers and book references for each of the italicized quotations below) catalogs Rick Riordan's wide use of a variety of these profanity avoidance techniques in his first two series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2005–2009) and *Kane Chronicles* (2010–2012). (Interested parties may contact me for copies of data from Riordan's *Heroes of Olympus* series [2011–2013].) In the Appendix, each

type of profanity avoidance or use is organized into the following categories:

- A. Character never curses; no replacement necessary
- B. Swearing is summarized; e.g., *she swore, he cussed*
- C. Grawlixes; use of a string of symbols to replace offensive language (e.g., #@\$%!) is more common in graphic novels and comics than in regular novels.
- D. Partial excision; some letters in the word are elided, shortened with hyphens, or turned into acronyms. (This is not a very common method in recent years, although a character who is beginning to swear may be cut off by another character in conversation, leaving just a hint of what was to come. The most modern version of this may be the texting acronym of OMG for "Oh my God.")
- E. Spelling changed to fit a dialect; e.g., *dem* for *damn*
- F. Contracted phrase; e.g., *helluva*
- G. Swearing in another language; e.g., *di immortales, vlacas, bifurcum*
- H. Archaisms; e.g., *zounds, blast*
- I. Minced oaths; commonly used replacement words—e.g., *golly, heck, flipping, bleep*
- J. Euphemisms; e.g., *kick you in your soft spot*
- K. Homophones; words that sound like profanity but aren't (e.g., *schist, dam*)
- L. Invented replacement words or phrases; this can be done very well or very badly. Too many middle grade fantasy books only use one replacement word (*Artemis Fowl* [Colfer, 2001] uses *D'Arvit* and nothing else). This is where Riordan's work is above average, often using the names of mythical places or people—e.g., *Hades' gym shorts! By the twelve gates of night! Pan's pipes!*
- M. The Captain Haddock approach; in the Tintin books (1929–1986; Haddock appears first in *The Adventures of Tintin, Vol. 3, 1932*), Hergé used long strings of erudite, tangential words for his hard-swearing sea captain—e.g., *billions of blistering blue barnacles*. (See Lopresti, 2009.)
- N. Characters curse; generally the choice of words is still mild in middle grade fiction and nearly nonexistent in writing for younger children. The terms that are found in middle grade fiction are most likely to be blasphemous (e.g., *my god*) rather than execratory or sexual in nature (e.g., *suck*). See Ursula Vernon's *Dragonbreath* (2009).
- O. Miscellaneous; speech acts related to swearing, but

that aren't actually acts of profaning. These include blessings, curses, insults, invocations, oaths, and names.

Implications for Instruction

Much more research can be done on the ways that Riordan's work and other middle grade novels differ linguistically, thematically, or materially from those marketed as children's books or young adult books. However, it is useful for educators and other promoters of these books to realize that most middle grade authors do see their readers as qualitatively and quantitatively different from older teens or children. While these young people are beginning to find ways to articulate their own experiences, a good novel may help them learn linguistic etiquette and originality.

Instructors can benefit from initiating classroom conversations about how language is never used in isolation. The context in which certain types of language are used is as critical as the words themselves (Jay, 2009). It can be valuable for language arts instruction to explore together issues of school and workplace policies of propriety, respect, self-expression, censorship, and other related debates, such as dress codes. Students may be asked to identify creative profanity avoidance, insults, and/or slang in various novels and then comment on the contexts of usage in each instance. Studying the ways in which middle grade authors deal with the appropriateness of certain types of language may be paired with secondary materials relating to First Amendment issues or cases where a student or teacher faced censure (including suspensions and firings) due to controversies surrounding profanity (see Sutton, 1992). It can be useful to have students write honest reflections about the types of slang, grammar, insults, and even profanity that may be common in their home lives, perhaps contrasting that with the expectations that schools have. Students may also participate in the crafting of a classroom policy on respectful language use with an acknowledged goal that all students feel the classroom space is a safe haven, free for self-expression while free from any forms of verbal abuse.

Simultaneously, it is important to be aware that students come from broadly divergent backgrounds, and how a child speaks can be closely tied to identity. Vajra M. Watson's (2013) study deals brilliantly with

the complications surrounding language use and systems of power that disenfranchise and silence many student voices. She wishes instructors to be aware that "classroom decorum is a culturally based assumption" (p. 403). One of her recommendations is that "teachers remain open to the truths students speak while offering them the tools to understand their audience, and furthermore, to code-switch when they deem it necessary and useful" (p. 403). Rick Riordan's strategies and those used by many other professional writers who have already had to grapple with the tension between writing honestly and writing respectfully, may empower some of those students to find a way to enrich their own voices.

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Appendix A:

Profanity Usage and Creative Avoidance in Percy Jackson and the Olympians (2005–2009) and the Kane Chronicles (2010–2012)

Book Title	Instance of Avoidance or Usage	Point of View	Speaker/ Actor	Page	Type (see pp. 14–15)
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Darn right!” yelled the driver.	Percy	Bus driver	27	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	Grover was freaking me out.	Percy	Percy	29	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	Maybe if I kick you in your soft spot, I thought.	Percy	Percy	35	J
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“O Zeu kai alloi theoi!” he yelled.	Percy	Grover	42	G
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Oh, Styx!” he mumbled.	Percy	Grover	59	L
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Erre es korakas!” Annabeth said, which I somehow understood was Greek for “Go to the crows!”	Percy	Annabeth	89	G
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“By the gods, Percy.”	Percy	Luke	111	M
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Di immortales!” Annabeth said.	Percy	Annabeth	125	G
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Dirty rotten” (Annabeth grumbling)	Percy	Annabeth	128	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	Heck, it was nothing. I eat hellhounds for breakfast.	Percy	Percy (thoughts)	133	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Gee,” I said. “Thanks.”	Percy	Percy	153	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“May the Fates forbid.”	Percy	Chiron	156	O
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	Grover whimpered. “Di immortales.”	Percy	Grover	161	G
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Braccas meas vescimini!” I yelled. I wasn’t sure where the Latin came from. I think it meant “Eat my pants!”	Percy	Percy	166	G
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Oh, goodness,” Annabeth said.	Percy	Annabeth	260	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Shoot, take a nap. I don’t care.”	Percy	Procrustes	278	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Almost, darn it.”	Percy	Procrustes	279	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	Annabeth and Grover got to their feet, groaning and wincing and cursing me a lot.	Percy	Annabeth and Grover	282	B
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Let’s whup some Underworld butt.”	Percy	Percy	284	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Jeez, Annabeth,” he grumbled.	Percy	Grover	357	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“May the gods curse him.”	Percy	Annabeth	371	O
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Oh my gods, you were looking in my bedroom window?”	Percy	Percy	23	N
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Found one. Thank the gods.”	Percy	Annabeth	29	N
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Oh, man,” said Annabeth.	Percy	Annabeth	38	I
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Swear upon the River Styx.”	Percy	Chiron	54	O
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Blast!” Tantalus muttered.	Percy	Tantalus	59	H, I
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“By the gods, I can see the family resemblance.”	Percy	Tantalus	64	N
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Oh my gods, Percy! You are so hopeless!”	Percy	Annabeth	86	N
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“May the gods go with you.”	Percy	Hermes	106	O
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Curse my relatives!”	Percy	Chiron	136	O
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Oh my gods.”	Percy	Annabeth	136	N
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Damn the heroes!” the girl said. “Full steam ahead.”	Percy	Clarisse	146	N
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	Somehow back in my regular clothes, thank the gods.	Percy	Percy (thoughts)	182	N
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	I made a silent promise to the gods that if we survived this, I’d tell Annabeth she was a genius.	Percy	Percy	211	O

Book Title	Instance of Avoidance or Usage	Point of View	Speaker/ Actor	Page	Type (see pp. 14–15)
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Tyson, thank the gods. Annabeth is hurt!” “You thank the gods she is hurt?” he asked, puzzled.	Percy	Percy/ Tyson	221	N
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Father Poseidon, curse this thief!”	Percy	Polyphemus	226	O
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	I cursed.	Percy	Percy	229	B
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	The Pegasus mare bucked and whinnied. I could understand her thoughts. She was calling Agrius and Luke some names so bad Chiron would’ve washed her muzzle out with saddle soap.	Percy	A mare	242	B
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Gee, thanks,” Grover mumbled.	Percy	Grover	249	I
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	I cursed.	Percy	Percy	267	B
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Curse the titan lord,” Chiron said.	Percy	Chiron	276	O
<i>Titan’s Curse</i>	“Curse you!” Thorn cried.	Percy	Thorn	25	O
<i>Titan’s Curse</i>	“What in the name of the gods were you THINKING?” she bellowed.	Percy	Thalia	87	N
<i>Titan’s Curse</i>	“If you tell anyone,” I swear—	Percy	Thalia	173	O
<i>Titan’s Curse</i>	At Hoover Dam: “Let us find the dam snack bar,” Zoë said. “We should eat while we can.” Grover cracked a smile. “The dam snack bar?” Zoë blinked. “Yes, what is funny?” “Nothing,” Grover said, trying to keep a straight face. “I could use some dam french fries.” Even Thalia smiled at that. “And I need to use the dam restroom.”	Percy	Zoë, Grover, Thalia	208	K
<i>Titan’s Curse</i>	“Holy Zeus, what were those tourists thinking?”	Percy	Bronze angel statue	219	L
<i>Titan’s Curse</i>	The loudest sound was the voice of Atlas, bellowing curses against the gods as he struggled under the weight of the sky.	Percy	Atlas	275	B
<i>Titan’s Curse</i>	“Dad! You flew . . . you shot . . . oh my gods!”	Percy	Annabeth	276	N
<i>Titan’s Curse</i>	Apollo said, “Jeez, you need to lighten up.”	Percy	Apollo	290	I
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	“What in Hades?” Annabeth tugged on the bars.	Percy	Annabeth	109	L
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	“They’re sacred to Apollo.” “Holy cows?” “Exactly.”	Percy	Annabeth/ Percy	135	I
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	“Holy Poseidon,” I muttered.	Percy	Percy	209	L
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	Annabeth said, “Gee, I wonder.”	Percy	Annabeth	290	I
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	“ <i>Di immortales</i> ,” Annabeth muttered.	Percy	Annabeth	277	G
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	There wasn’t even any thought to it. No debate in my mind about—gee, should I stand up to him and try to fight again? Nope.	Percy	Percy	304	I
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	“That sucked,” he said.	Percy	Nico	206	N
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	She looked really angry, like she was going to tan somebody’s backside.	Percy	Juniper	328	J
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	“ <i>Di immortales</i> .” Chiron yelled.	Percy	Chiron	329	G
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	“Zeus knows how many more.”	Percy	Dionysus	340	L
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	“Oh, Hades if I know.”	Percy	Dionysus	346	L
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Oh, gods,” I muttered. “Don’t even think about it.”	Percy	Percy	10	N

Book Title	Instance of Avoidance or Usage	Point of View	Speaker/ Actor	Page	Type (see pp. 14–15)
<i>Last Olympian</i>	Demigod dreams suck.	Percy	Percy	28	N
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Dear, me. It didn’t work out, did it?”	Percy	Mrs. Castellan	95	I
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Oh, goodness.”	Percy	Mrs. Castellan	96	I
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Let the gods witness.”	Percy	Achilles	134	O
<i>Last Olympian</i>	I cursed and got to my feet.	Percy	Percy	139	B
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Oh gee,” he said sarcastically.	Percy	Nico	139	I
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“ <i>Di immortales.</i> ”	Percy	Annabeth	160	G
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Gods we have a lot of work to do.”	Percy	Annabeth	161	N
<i>Last Olympian</i>	I bit back a curse.	Percy	Percy	171	B
<i>Last Olympian</i>	Holy horse feed!	Percy	Blackjack the Pegasus	183	L
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“I called her some names. . . . I doubt that helped.”	Percy	Michael Yew	184	B
<i>Last Olympian</i>	Pomona cursed in Latin and threw more fruit.	Percy	Pomona	195	B, G
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“I swear,” Hades said. . . . as long as I labor under the curse of your Great Prophecy, the Oracle of Delphi will never have another mortal host.”	Percy	Hades	211	O
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Oh, gods,” she said.	Percy	Rachel	212	N
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“That’s a load of minotaur dung,” Thalia said.	Percy	Thalia	220	L
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“ <i>Erre es korakas</i> , Blinky!” Dionysus cursed. “I will have your soul!”	Percy	Dionysus	267	G
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Gods, you’re annoying.”	Percy	Percy	268	N
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“ <i>Na pari I oychi!</i> ”	Percy	Dionysus	269	G
<i>Last Olympian</i>	I cursed in Ancient Greek.	Percy	Percy	286	B
<i>Last Olympian</i>	<i>Oh-my-gods-that-big-snake-is-going-to-eat-me</i> type of paralysis.	Percy	Percy	287	N
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Gods, I hate heights!” Thalia yelled.	Percy	Thalia	321	N
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Oh gods,” I said.	Percy	Percy	341	N
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Gods, that would be embarrassing.”	Percy	Rachel	380	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Background noises such as scuffling, hitting, and cursing by the two speakers have not been transcribed.”	Author	Preface		B
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	[Shut up, Sadie.]	Carter	Carter	3	I
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“God.”	Carter	Sadie	12	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“God.”	Carter	Sadie	22	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	[Give me the bloody mic.]	Sadie	Sadie	29	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“He’s a bloody Egyptologist!”	Sadie	Sadie	35	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	Bloody typical.	Sadie	Sadie	37	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Oh my god”	Carter	Sadie	54	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	Carter gave me one of his <i>God, you’re stupid</i> looks.	Sadie	Sadie	90	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Just open the bloody box.”	Sadie	Sadie	90	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Excuse me?” I asked, because <i>cartouche</i> sounded like a rather rude word, and I pride myself on knowing those.	Sadie	Sadie	97	K
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Oh, god,” I said. “Sorry, sorry. Do I die now?”	Sadie	Sadie	190	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Oh, god.”	Carter	Sadie	212 217	N

Book Title	Instance of Avoidance or Usage	Point of View	Speaker/ Actor	Page	Type (see pp. 14–15)
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“God, no.”	Sadie	Sadie	220	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“By Ra’s throne!”	Carter	Bast	221	L
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Bloody awful reason to keep us apart,” I muttered.	Sadie	Sadie	245	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	<i>God, I look awful.</i>	Sadie	Sadie	247	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	God, why hadn’t that occurred to me?	Sadie	Sadie	285	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	I had to use all my will to keep Isis from blurting out a string of insults.	Sadie	Sadie	290	B
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“God,” I said.	Sadie	Sadie	299	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	I kept yelling at the spot where Anubis had stood, calling him some choice names.	Sadie	Sadie	366	B
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Thank Thoth I found you!”	Carter	Zia	374	L
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Thoth’s beak! You are impossibly stubborn.”	Carter	Zia	376	L
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	God, I can’t believe I just said that.	Sadie	Sadie	403	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	I was a bloody twelve year old.	Sadie	Sadie	442	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Oh, god.”	Sadie	Sadie	466	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	God forbid, she might not even like Carter.	Sadie	Sadie	488	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	Carter, god help me, was also my friend.	Sadie	Sadie	490	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	God only knew.	Sadie	Sadie	491	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	Sadie looked at me and mouthed O-M-G.	Carter	Sadie	510	D
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	Sadie raised an eyebrow. “God, you’re thick sometimes.”	Carter	Sadie	512	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	I muttered an Egyptian curse—the cussing kind, not the magic kind.	Carter	Carter	21	B, G
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“God, thank you,” I said. “Goddess,” Bast corrected.	Sadie	Sadie/Bast	33	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	Adele’s <i>19</i> began playing. God, I hadn’t heard that album since	Sadie	Sadie	36	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	My god.	Sadie	Sadie	42	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Not bloody likely.”	Sadie	Sadie	66	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	Neckbutt (Neckbet)	Sadie	Sadie	102	N, O
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“For god’s sake.”	Sadie	Sadie	105	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	For a brief moment, I thought, My god, it’s Khufu.	Sadie	Sadie	106	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	Lord, he was good-looking and so annoying.	Sadie	Sadie	112	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	Emma demanded. “God, he was hot.” “A god,” I muttered. “Yes.”	Sadie	Sadie	113	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	Liz made a gagging sound. “Lord, no! That’s wrong!”	Sadie	Liz	135	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Gosh, thanks.”	Sadie	Sadie	189	I
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Holy Mother Nut.”	Carter	Bes	238	L
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“ <i>Di immortales!</i> ”	Sadie	Roman ghost	266	G
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Oh, Jupiter. You’re novices.”	Sadie	Roman ghost	267	L
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Ptah, son of Pitooley? Is he the god of spitting?”	Sadie	Sadie	273	O
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Oh, god.”	Sadie	Sadie	277	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“God, you’re annoying.”	Sadie	Walt	283	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	Bes unfroze, found himself halfway submerged in sand, and did some creative cursing.	Carter	Bes	299	B

Book Title	Instance of Avoidance or Usage	Point of View	Speaker/ Actor	Page	Type (see pp. 14–15)
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“The bloody sundial—the stupid gates—we failed!”	Carter	Sadie	382	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Stuff it, moon god,” Bes said.	Carter	Bes	389	I
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	Sadie called Apophis some words so bad, Gran would’ve washed her mouth out with soap for a year.	Carter	Sadie	408	B
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Oh, god.”	Carter	Sadie	416	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Holy Horus,” Carter said	Sadie	Carter	422	L
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“You’re a god, aren’t you? You can bloody well do what you like.”	Sadie	Sadie	30	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	Bloody gods and their bloody riddles.	Sadie	Sadie	32	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	She muttered something in Arabic—probably a curse	Carter	Zia	55	G
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Please. War gods do not poop on blankets.”	Carter	Horus as pigeon	65	I
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	Gods of Egypt.	Sadie	Sadie	79	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Oh . . . my . . . god,” Drew whimpered.	Sadie	Drew	84	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	We left the Plastic Bags behind us, all of them muttering, “Oh my god! Oh my god!”	Sadie	The Plastic Bags	84	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	Gods of Egypt. I was a mess.	Sadie	Sadie	85	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	It was so bloody unfair.	Sadie	Sadie	94	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	Oh, gods of Egypt.	Sadie	Sadie	107	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	The news didn’t sit well with my brother. After several minutes of swearing and pacing the room he finally calmed down.	Sadie	Carter	175	B
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	It wasn’t bloody fair!	Sadie	Sadie	179	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Oh by the twelve gates of night,” Dad cursed.	Sadie	Dr. Kane	189	L
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	I nearly discovered the hieroglyph for <i>accident in my pants</i> .	Carter	Carter	209	J
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Oh, gods of Egypt—please don’t let that be Hapi’s loincloth.”	Carter	Zia	222	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“What’s in there?” “Bull,” Setne said. “Excuse me?”	Carter	Setne	223	K
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	A year ago, I would have said, “Freaky, but at least it’s just a statue.”	Carter	Carter	230	I
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Gods of Egypt, not <i>that</i> again!”	Sadie	Sadie	247	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Gods forbid!— ”	Sadie	Sadie	264	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	<i>And what bloody business?</i>	Sadie	Sadie	266	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Holy Horus, pal!” he complained.	Carter	Setne	290	L
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	Whatever he told me was complete and utter Apis-quality bull.	Carter	Carter about Setne	290	L, N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Oh . . .” I uttered some words that were definitely not divine.	Carter	Carter	308	B
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Oh, Holy Horus.”	Carter	Carter	312	L
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	Gods of Egypt.	Sadie	Sadie	317	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	Gods of Egypt, this was confusing.	Sadie	Sadie	327	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	Zia’s jaw dropped. “Gods of Egypt.”	Carter	Zia	381	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“It’s so bloody hard,” I complained.	Sadie	Sadie	389	N

Postmodern Allegory of Adolescence:

Daniel Handler and Maira Kalman's *Why We Broke Up*

Certain terms are slippery. We believe we have a sense of what they mean and then, when called upon to define them, they elude us. A situation like this occurs in the movie *Reality Bites* (Stiller, 1994) when Winona Ryder's character is asked by a newspaper editor to define irony. She is able only to produce a string of incoherent attempts culminating in her yelping: "I know it when I see it!" as the elevator doors close on her prospective career in journalism. *Postmodernism* is one of those elusive terms. We recognize it intuitively in certain films (the movies of Christopher Nolan), advertisements (Robert Pattinson for Dior Homme), and public spaces, as Baudrillard (1994) and Eco (1986) point out in the landscape of Las Vegas (e.g., the full-scale reproduction of a Venetian canal within a mega-hotel/casino), but the word itself remains relatively intangible.

For purposes of this discussion, I will employ the understanding conveyed by Fredric Jameson (1997) in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson explains postmodernism as an expression of a technological and economic shift ("capitalism's third stage") that initiated new forms of communication, commerce, and socialization, as well as a tandem aesthetic in the arts (p. xx). This shift becomes important for cultural critics such as Jameson in that it establishes a specific style identifiable as postmodern in diverse mediums such as films, literature, art, and architecture, as well as a postmodern milieu or setting that informs scholarly meditation on the social and ethical implications of the historical transition noted above.

Daniel Handler and Maira Kalman's (2011) illustrated novel *Why We Broke Up* is a postmodern "mash-up" of narrative, visual imagery, and pop-cultural references that might be understood through Jameson's (1997) notion of pastiche—the hallmark of postmodernism recognizable as a kind of collage of "allusions" and "styles" (p. 18). Through detailed analysis of pastiche, Jameson proposes that specific texts bear a metaphoric relationship to postmodernity. My contention in this article is that young adult literature, by virtue of qualities reflective of the technological, economic, and social transformations described by Jameson, may be considered similarly. Therefore, a new conversation on postmodern adolescent identity becomes accessible through the signs located in its texts.

Methods utilized to explore the intersection of young adult literature and postmodernity are varied. One thread of the research examines stylistic elements evidenced broadly in postmodern literature and specifically in contemporary young adult literature. These include hybridized and experimental forms of text, as well as acknowledgment of text as a construction (Serafini & Blasingame, 2012); interactive, "intertextual," ironic, and iconoclastic features of postmodern texts (Knickerbocker & Brueggman, 2008, p. 67); and the dissolving of the distinction between "fact" and "fiction" (Head, 1996, p. 30). Another thread of the research examines the way that individual authors of young adult literature demonstrate postmodern style and themes, such as Engles and Kory's (2014) exploration of the problematics of racism and subject-

tivity in the work of Walter Dean Myers and Susina's (2002) description of a fluid and transcendent notion of identity and relation in the youthful characters of Francesca Lia Block, denizens of a fantasy version of Los Angeles. And in a third thread of research exploring pedagogy and audience reception, Groenke & Youngquist (2011) challenge characterizations of youth as naturally attuned to and receptive toward postmodern texts, noting in their findings that students were often confounded by the indeterminate form and content of Myers's *Monster*.

What these diverse studies have in common is the ultimate effect of variously texturizing or giving substance to a contemporary vision of identity and practice in youth culture. It is that tendency I draw upon in order to make sense of Min Green, the protagonist from *Why We Broke Up*. More specifically, this work contributes to the continued exploration of the relationship between postmodernism and young adult literature by offering an explanation as to how the literature contributes to new articulations of adolescent identity and experience against a postmodern backdrop largely mediated by technology and consumerism.

A synopsis of the book is helpful prior to launching into discussion of its philosophical commitments. The narrator, Min Green (named Minerva "[after] the Roman goddess of wisdom" [Handler & Kalman, 2011, p. 18]), is an eleventh grader and would-be film director who, throughout the text, makes extensive reference to admired classic and obscure films. Her point of view is engineered entirely by cinema, as evidenced by her continuous citation of movie plots, directors, actors, and cinematographers of the past. Interestingly, all of the elaborate movie references described in the book are fictional imaginings of the writer, Daniel Handler—a fact that has surprised reviewers due to the extreme level of detail in the descriptions (Chilton, 2012; Edinger, 2011). The precise film plots, however, are less important than what this massive fictionalization represents: namely, the imaginary universe of references comes to have more reality (both for Min and the reader) than reality itself. Put differently, the fiction becomes reality, signifying the postmodern blurring of such distinctions central to the text.

Min Green makes sense of life through pastiche, or a gathering of fragments: samplings from film, food, clothing, music, literature, and other assorted

retro/vintage goods. All of these samples coalesce into an expression of avant-garde style as she imagines it. This reflects Jameson's (1997) conception of pastiche, a term that refers to a "cannibalization of . . . styles of the past [and] the play of random stylistic allusion" (p. 18), which does not reflect historical reality but instead an imagined version of history conveyed through a sense of "pastness" (p. 19). Min nostalgically looks to the past, a period that, although not specifically identified, we might assign as coincident with "Hollywood's Golden Age" (Handler & Kalman, 2011, p. 340), in order to assuage her discontent with the present. The reason Min finds the present dissatisfying (inferred from her extended critiques) is due to the banalities of high school life and the vapid interactions constituting teen sociality. So she evokes another, more glamorous sensibility through immersion in references, objects, and experiences that supplement the perceived lack in the present and, more important, eventually displace reality.

This misrecognition has very specific consequences for Min in that she grossly misreads the intentions of a "player." (Handler engineers this double entendre by casting Min's love interest, Ed Slaterton, as a basketball player and a "player" in the colloquial sense of a Lothario.) Throughout the book, Min imagines Ed as the lead male actor in the fantasy film she is directing. In the end, Min's illusions are deconstructed not only by Ed's duplicity, but also in terms of her relationship to the broader apparatus of popular culture. This epiphany occurs in the moment when Min realizes Ed's betrayal, and she levels the criticism: "This isn't a movie . . . We're not movie stars" (Handler & Kalman, 2011, p. 333). Readers recognize that this has been the problem all along, and the subject of the book shifts from teen romance to how adolescents are hailed by media and consumer culture and how they respond to and resist interpellation.

Therefore, what we ultimately discover in *Why We Broke Up* is a postmodern allegory of adoles-

Min Green makes sense of life through pastiche, or a gathering of fragments: samplings from film, food, clothing, music, literature, and other assorted retro/vintage goods.

cence. I centralize adolescence because, although the situation I have described mirrors the position of the adult subject, Cecilia, from Woody Allen's film *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (in that media images supplant the real), Min is a teenager, and the texture of her world very specifically marks out the territory of the contemporary adolescent (as of course, young adult

This experience is complicated as the character of Min paradoxically confirms and challenges the view of the adolescent as subject to the seduction of media and consumer culture.

literature does) in order to thematize conflicts specific to youth culture. As such, Min serves as an adolescent representative of one particular experience in postmodernity.

This experience is complicated as the character of Min paradoxically confirms *and* challenges the view of the adolescent as subject to the seduction of media and consumer culture. I draw upon varied theorists in order to provide an analysis of the

postmodern setting Min navigates in an effort to offer a fresh account of contemporary adolescence poised in a liminal (i.e., transitory, provisional) space located between the hyperreal, Baudrillard's (1994) notion of a constructed world of images indistinguishable from (and effectively replacing) the real, and the real.

The Logic of Compilation

As stated previously, Jameson (1997) argues that pastiche serves as the essential descriptive feature of postmodern texts in their eclectic sampling of "styles" and "allusions" (p. 18), and the book under discussion here liberally demonstrates that tendency. Handler (a.k.a., Lemony Snicket), therefore, arouses curiosity in interviews when he denies drawing from any existing reference base in the composition of *Why We Broke Up*. For instance, when asked why he invented the elaborate network of allusions within the text, Handler comments disparagingly about the hackneyed choices demonstrated by authors in the genre of young adult literature at large:

I always think it's more fun to make up a pop-cultural detail, particularly in books written for teenagers. Now

there's often so much lazy pop-culture references in lieu of making things up that it seems a shame to join that sad parade. (Handler, as cited in Robinson, 2012)

It seems important to question Handler's remarks in light of Barthes's argument concerning the tendency for texts to sample from all other existing texts, a phenomenon he labels as the "inter-text," or "the impossibility of living outside the infinite text" (1975, p. 36).

Applied to Handler's novel, although the majority of the allusions are invented, the text does not emerge out of nowhere; it partakes, however flirtingly, in the discourse of film. That is why it's possible to locate instances of indirect quotation within Handler's narrative of other narratives, like John Hughes's (1986) *Pretty in Pink*. In a famous scene from the film, McCarthy takes Ringwald to a party hosted by his friends, and she is disrespected for being out of place amidst his social group. The identical thing happens in Handler's book in the bonfire scene for different reasons, but the diegetic treatment of the exclusionary act is the same. Likewise, one could argue that the Min/Ed/Al love triangle in Handler's book replicates the well-known Sheedy/Nelson/McCarthy scenario from Joel Schumacher's *St. Elmo's Fire* (1985) in that the best friend/"secret love" character bides his time and wins the girl in the end. Considering Handler's year of birth (1970) and the historical proximity of the aforementioned references, it would not be hard to guess that the mainstream movie Ed invites Min to see at the vulgar Multiplex (Min patronizes only arthouse theaters such as the Internationale and the Carnelian), titled *Goofballs III*, probably references any one of the following franchises: *Caddyshack*, *Meatballs*, *Police Academy*, *Porky's*, or *Revenge of the Nerds*. By the same logic (and similarity of sound), the head-banging music played by "Andronika" at the "All-City Halloween Bash" to which Ed takes Min may well be Metallica (pp. 222, 258).

This is mentioned not to find fault with Handler's prose, which is delightful, but to reinforce the importance of pastiche in situating a critical reading of this book. Citation texturizes Min's world; it is an integral part of the way that she lives—through a network of allusions (drawn eclectically from film, literature, art, fashion, "foodie culture," retro-collectibles, etc.) that structure feeling and practice. As indicated by Jameson (1997), such references not only propose a logic of aesthetics, but also cultivate a way of seeing and

being in the world. For example, a public park becomes mythical for its namesake Boris Vian, recoding teenage eros as surreal, jazzy iconoclasm (Schwartz, 2014). An expressionistic vampire film reconstitutes the confusion of sexual intimacy as alluring artistic distortion. A baroque, Felliniesque coffee house, Leopardi's, recasts the quotidian teen quest for caffeine as artistic inspiration (e.g., Leopardi's espresso is "deep and dark as the first three Malero films that make the world angled and blinky" [p. 178]). And a regal, elderly woman, Lottie Carson, becomes the focus of Min's new adventure—pursuing this woman who Min believes to be a former starlet, now in hiding, in order to invite her to a party in her honor (p. 36). Min's references, taken in total, offer an idealized vision of life preferable to the real. As if sorting through the dailies of life—an action Min fantasizes doing—she requires that life become equal to the representation until the two have little distinction for her. These references, in the drama of Min's life, diminish empirical fact and amplify instead a *style* of living that has little relationship with reality.

Similarly, ordinary objects are decontextualized and redeposited into romantic narrative through citation. A school pennant "wave[s] in the breeze of the stale vents like when the diplomats arrive in *Hotel Continental*" (p. 108). A tool in a hardware store seems "like a file they use in *We Break at Dawn* or *Fugitives by Moonlight* to run free with the dogs after them and the barbed wire silhouetted against the floodlights" (p. 235). A book of matches is overwritten as a talisman through whimsical allusion to Marc Chagall, and a sugar dispenser is stolen as Ed's ritual initiation into the simulation of cinematic crime drama. The potential for mystification associated with allusion is especially evident in Min's response to Ed's repeated declaration that he is a basketball player, such as when she emphatically asserts, "But today you are a sugar thief" (p. 152). Min casts Ed as the love interest in a film she believes she is scripting, and the fantasy is fortified by shimmering references to the past that give body to the illusion of the present. It seems important to view these instances, in total, not as symptoms of typical adolescent coming-of-age conflict, but more broadly as indicators of a response to a cultural saturation of images.

What does all of this mean? Certainly, the layered citations engineer an aesthetic style, but at the same

time, in the case of Min—representative teen in this drama of youth culture—they highlight the postmodern quandary of supplanting the real with, in the language of Baudrillard (1994), a simulacrum or imitation of reality. The collage of exotic signs throughout the book, considered in total, represents a vision of teenage utopia largely expressed through an assemblage of media experiences and consumer artifacts. But the seductive play of images does something else besides: Min's inability or unwillingness to accurately apprehend reality in the present causes her to misrecognize Ed.

Bluebeard, 2.0

Conscripted by Min in her romantic quest to arrange a surprise, eighty-ninth birthday party for the supposed film starlet, Lottie Carson, Ed faithfully performs the role of location scout and finds the ideal setting. Together, Min and Ed survey a charming bandstand bordered by "crumbling" statues ensconced in ivy called Bluebeard Gardens. Min studies the collection of stone sentinels comprised of:

Soldiers and politicians, composers and Irishmen, all along the perimeter, angry on horseback or proud with a staff. A turtle with the world on its back. A few modern things, a big black triangle, three shapes on top of one another. (p. 206)

The incongruous grouping matches the mood of the scene, which is marvelous, fragmented, and unaccountable. Min, ever directing herself in the movie of her life, reflects: "I am alone eating . . . pistachios and lining up perfectly the shells in half circles getting smaller and smaller and smaller like parentheses in parenthesis" (p. 204), as if she were a character out of Buñuel. Ed dances a few mysterious beats solo across the empty stage, and Min rhapsodizes that "this is the perfect place for Lottie Carson's eighty-ninth birthday party" (p. 206)—Bluebeard Gardens.

The fairytale allusion is anything but neutral as readers recall that the story of Bluebeard is a hor-

The collage of exotic signs throughout the book . . . represents a vision of teenage utopia largely expressed through an assemblage of media experiences and consumer artifacts.

rifying account of a serial wife-killer (not a pirate, as some people imagine, confusing Bluebeard with Blackbeard). Although Ed is obviously not a murderer,

It is precisely this condition that the book renders artfully: the potentially perilous quality of being an adolescent in a moment mediated by gloss and spectacle.

the irony in the context of the book is significant. Min, who considers herself an intellectual above all else, has fallen for a “lady-killer.” Yet, even in the moment when confronted with this truth, she refuses to accept the evidence, instead preferring a cinematic fantasy.

How does Ed know about this park? We learn, along with Min, that another of Ed’s ex-girlfriends used to live just beyond the

park’s perimeter (thus far in the narrative, the reader has encountered at least two former girlfriends). Ed provides Min with a rapid sketch of their affair: “Amy Simon. Sophomore year. She moved, her dad got transferred. Real asshole, that guy, strict and paranoid. So we used to sneak here,” to which Min replies, “So, I’m not the first girl you’ve gotten naked in a park?” (p. 207). Her flippant comment refers to the particularly passionate scene just prior to this one involving erotic food-play. What is important here is that, instead of thinking seriously about Ed’s remarks and the hastily delivered pledge of love thereafter, Min edits the scene so that it synchronizes with a more agreeable film metaphor (e.g., our love is not a “sequel” but a “remake,” “with a new director and crew trying something else and starting from scratch” [p. 207]).

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard (1994) writes: “Everywhere we live in a universe strangely similar to the original—things doubled by their own scenario” (p. 11). Min inhabits a historical moment in which, according to Baudrillard (1994), technology enables reproduction to the degree that copies become virtually indistinguishable from, and effectively replace, reality (e.g., via film, advertising, news media, and science)—a condition he refers to as hyperreality. At this point in the narrative, Min is complicit in and uncritical of the seduction of images by preferring a simulation of life to reality . . . to her

peril. In this sense, the book acts as a critique of a society that indulges so liberally in fantasy.

Linking back to adolescence, Min’s retort, “So, I’m not the first girl you’ve gotten naked in a park?” has the appearance of irony, as if she is in control and participating in a form of witty film banter. Elsewhere in the book, she confesses to having this fantasy when she praises Ed for his supposed adoption of cinematic vernacular: “You were getting better at talking like this with me, the bounce-bounce dialogue that’s so good in all the *Old Hat* movies” (pp. 224–225). However, it is apparent that their brief relationship is only a play of surfaces: Min does not know Ed; there is no human yardstick by which to measure, and so anything is possible. Bluebeard kept a bloody closetful of dead wives (Perrault, 1889/1965), and Ed maintains an expanding list of female conquests or trophies. It would probably seem inconceivable to Min that Ed could be capable of constructing a simulation of romance equal to or better than a movie. It is precisely this condition that the book renders artfully: the potentially perilous quality of being an adolescent in a moment mediated by gloss and spectacle.

Dramas in Non-Place

The aesthetics of the place Ed takes Min (the Dawn’s Early Lite Lounge and Motel) on the symbolic occasion she has chosen to lose her virginity are important. Like the description of most every other place in the book, interior design signs to another time, but this is a style other than the one Min admires, as the motel décor suggests a retro version of Las Vegas kitsch. Min describes the garish signage comprised of “three arrows taking turns illuminating so the arrow is moving” and a bizarre display in the motel lounge involving “taxidermy birds” and a mechanical butterfly moving to the simulated sounds of nature (p. 293). The absurd theatricalization and resultant parody of nature presages the unsettling events that will occur in the motel room.

Min quickly recognizes that, contrary to her requirements for this significant event, the motel room is “not extraordinary” (p. 294). This is evident in the sordid quality that permeates the artifacts Min selects to symbolize the experience, represented by Kalman’s artwork: a motel door hanger, a comb, and two condom wrappers—objects different from the romantic

ones she'd selected previously to symbolize their love. These items hold little imaginative appeal for Min, as they are purely utilitarian, fixed in use-value—like the motel room. The small collection signifies the obverse of fairytale logic in which everyday objects morph by enchantment into romantic accomplices (Heiner, 2012). Instead, these ordinary items signify only the pragmatics of sex.

Focusing more closely on the motel room, it mirrors the attributes of non-place described by Augé (2008) in *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* as places lacking in the “identity,” “relation,” and “history” (p. 63) of anthropological place and, therefore, reality. Augé catalogues non-places to include “airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets, and . . . the complex skein of cable and wireless networks that mobilize extraterrestrial space” (p. 64). Drawing on this characterization of space, the motel room represents one of many non-places or “intersection[s]” reified, however briefly, by the impersonal logic of commerce (Augé, 2008, p. 64). The motel room technically exists only within the “contractual” (Augé, 2008, p. 82) time for which it is rented; this, in turn, structures the temporality of relations that occur within non-place, for Min and Ed break up shortly after their stay.

The break-up ostensibly occurs in the next chapter due to the discovery of Ed's unfaithfulness. However, one could argue by virtue of the discussion above that the beginning of the end occurs in the motel scene when Min hides in the bathroom, mortified, as Ed casually receives a take-out order. Min recognizes in Ed's banter with the delivery person that he'd “done it all before” (p. 306), and the notion of a rerun is repellant. Ed's blasé attitude is a confirmation that he is a “player,” just as the motel room is a stop-gap and duplication of the many times it has served exactly the same purpose. In terms of the allegorical dimensions of the motel scene toward characterization of postmodern adolescence, the content works as commentary on the transience of young people's relationships mediated by the logic of commerce, just as the previous section texturized the precarious experience of adolescence mediated by a culture of images. The question now becomes: How does the adolescent subject resist the processes of “derealization” (Sartre, as cited in Jameson, 1997, p. 34) depicted in the book?

Between the Real and Hyperreal

So far, the characterization of Min makes her appear only as a dupe, powerless against a culture of media and consumer spectacle concurrent with the generationally held stereotype of adolescence described by Hagood, Stevens, and Reinking (2002). In fact, for the greater part of the book,

Min does appear estranged from a sense of reality through her absorption in a superficial world of images, objects, and experiences that mask social conditions she would prefer not to acknowledge, such as a school caste system gauged by status that authorizes certain identities and invalidates others.

This is the authentic allure of Ed Slaterton whose legitimacy, in terms of the social sorting mechanism of school culture, constitutes his aura. Following the break-up, Ed recedes from view in the narrative, seemingly reassuming his place in the social hierarchy, while Min is consigned to the periphery with the “drama and art” set (p. 222).

It is at this point that one version of adolescence ends and an alternative adolescent identity is proposed. Min, by the novel's end, is still powerfully committed to film; however, she is altered by her experiences, and her interior relationship to the medium seemingly shifts. This change effectively challenges the stereotype of teens as beguiled by and submissive to media images and points instead to another vision of teen sociality that is savvy and playful.

First, Min reports that she intends to host another glamorous dinner party with her friends, this time, “in honor . . . of nobody” (p. 353). In practical terms, this means that she is now able to see past the effects of simulation, whereas before, the seduction of cinema encouraged only deeper withdrawal into fantasy (exemplified by her party plan for the imaginary starlet and her misrecognition of Ed). Min demonstrates discernment in her comment regarding giving a dinner “in honor of nobody”; it is a sign that she has gained the distance necessary to critically negotiate the allure of representation.

Min...is still powerfully committed to film; however, she is altered by her experiences, and her interior relationship to the medium seemingly shifts.

Next, Min insists upon returning the box of artifacts documenting her and Ed's relationship, a radical gesture in terms of its refusal of the sentimental, mystifying effects of nostalgia (Jameson, 1997) evident in the classic movies she admires. To summon the

courage to do this, she invokes the character of "La Desperada" (p. 346), which enables her to brazenly deposit the collection of mementos on Ed's porch, along with her book-length break-up letter. Although this action (invoking La Desperada) seems to oppose the progress or character growth described above, it is not a sign of

regression or slippage back into what Baudrillard (1994) has referred to as the hyperreal or space indistinguishable as a simulation. The tone of the gesture is different from her attitude previously, betraying a critical sensibility and sense of agency. Min "thinks" the box by the door "with a Desperada gesture" (p. 354), signifying role-play as opposed to simulation. The action is performed with full cognizance of the adoption of a persona.

This variety of performance seems reminiscent of the kind seen in live action role-playing games (LARP), an eclectic pastiche of pop-cultural reference, storytelling, and theater popular with communities of young people and depicted in Westerfeld's (2009) short story "Definitional Chaos" from *Geektastic: Stories from the Nerd Herd*. In Westerfeld's account of LARPing, young people shift seamlessly between invented and actual identities in an intellectual game that destabilizes the dichotomies of past/present, real/imagined, and good/evil. The youthful narrator of Westerfeld's story comments insightfully on this provisional form of identity and play by characterizing it as a style of living "in game and out" (p. 60). In the context of Westerfeld's story, this is a commentary on the status of youth culture (specifically, "geek" attendees of ComicCons) inhabiting fictional and real worlds simultaneously.

Henry Giroux (1994), drawing on the theories of Paulo Freire and Edward Said, writes extensively on what he calls the "border identity" inhabited by young

people in an increasingly mobile and heterogeneous society in which distinctions such as race/ethnicity can no longer be thought of in the absolute terms imagined previously (p. 77). This is an expression of liminality, a transitory, contingent space between the presumably fixed coordinates of race, class, gender, and nation (Giroux, 1994). At the same time, Giroux (1992; 1994) alludes to other kinds of "border crossings" facilitated by globalization and a burgeoning technology useful for understanding the liminal form of adolescent identity proposed in Westerfeld's story and *Why We Broke Up*. For example, in the final pages of Handler and Kalman's (2011) book, Min recounts an intensely detailed description of a cooking sequence from an art film, filled with the kind of sensual detail that holds specific allure for her. Lush description of the meal prepared onscreen seamlessly fuses with the description of the actual items that she and her friends plan to serve at an elegant New Year's supper. The liminal space carved out in the hybridized detail, situated midway between the real world and the hyperreal world of cinema, is a textural expression of postmodern adolescence. The oneiric qualities of art lead Min to a more personal, intimate apprehension of the real. This is not a distortion of reality or an escape from it, like the earlier sections of this essay suggest, but instead it represents a complex expression of life lived in the enigmatic interstices that technology affords.

Implications for Educators

Thus far I have described an experience of youth culture in which adolescents (through their fictional proxies) submit to *and* resist the enticements of media-dominated consumer culture. Additionally, I have located postmodern adolescence as a liminal space, reflecting Poster's (2001) characterization of the "second information age . . . constituting a simulational culture" in which reality and subjectivity are apprehended "as unstable, multiple, and diffuse" (pp. 616, 618). However, as Garcia (2013) would argue, the conversation remains theoretical until applied pragmatically.

Some scholars situated at the intersection of young adult literature and critical theory whose work might be broadly identified within the field of Cultural Studies (Connors, 2008; Garcia, 2013; Latrobe

The tone of the gesture is different from her attitude previously, betraying a critical sensibility and sense of agency.

& Drury, 2009; Miller, 2014) advocate for a pedagogy consisting not only of textual scrutiny through various theoretical perspectives (e.g., Deconstruction, Feminism, Marxism, Psychoanalysis, etc.), but also through a form of analysis that positions students as interpreters of broader cultural values and practices observable through the prism of young adult literature.

As we move away from insular forms of textual study and toward methods of reading and composition organized around inquiry, young adult texts acquire revised utility. For example, Shanahan (2014) proposes a multiple-text, problem-driven strategy for composition requiring that students read across numerous, related sources in order to cultivate the skill of researched argument. Expanding on this idea, ELA teachers could select a constellation of genre-diverse and perspective-varied sources, including one young adult text, that would enable students to explore social theory and become authors of cultural criticism. For instance, if I wished to study the relationship between youth culture and “the entertainment and information technology industries” (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 29), then Handler and Kalman’s (2011) *Why We Broke Up* might be key among the sources selected for its ability to contextualize the subject. In such a unit, students would be the ultimate arbiters of the practices and effects of postmodern culture (i.e., students would negotiate the specific uses to which they put media and consumer artifacts as well as the constraints or freedoms of identity and relation that postmodern culture entails).

Why We Broke Up, although ostensibly a story about love and relationships, is *not* a story about love and relationships, or at least that is the last reason why it is interesting. Drawing on Min’s beloved area of film studies, the book offers readers a panoramic shot of something larger than the individual drama. It narrativizes social forces that would otherwise be very challenging to represent, and it engages young people in critical meditation on media-dominated consumer culture, ultimately offering a progressive vision of postmodern adolescence.

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Acting Adolescent?

Critical Examinations of the Youth–Adult Binary in *Feed* and *Looking for Alaska*

In mainstream and educational discourses, adolescence is typically understood through biological and psychological perspectives that view it as an inevitable stage of life with natural expectations. For example, thinking of adolescence as a time of “storm and stress” and rife with difficulties—particularly due to biological shifts such as “raging hormones”—is fairly commonplace. Similarly, it is typical to think of adolescents as incomplete people who are “coming of age” along a more or less standardized developmental trajectory. However, many of these dominant ways of knowing young people have been critiqued by recent scholarship that reconceptualizes adolescence as a construct (e.g., Austin & Willard, 1998; Lesko, 2012; Lesko & Talburt, 2012; Vadeboncoeur & Patel Stevens, 2005).

This scholarship demonstrates that the way people experience the time in life commonly referred to as *adolescence* varies widely and is generally more dependent upon sociocultural, historical, and ideological contexts than on biological and/or psychological influences. Like gender or race, understanding adolescence as a cultural construct exposes how ideas of adolescence, rather than being normal, natural, or fixed, are produced, circulated, strengthened, challenged, and subverted through social and cultural practices, policies, and texts.

As cultural artifacts, young adult literary texts both emerge from and affect broader social, cultural, and ideological understandings of adolescence/ts, and, thus, participate in the process of developing, propagating, and/or critiquing ideas of adolescence/

ts. In this article, we provide analyses of two popular young adult novels, *Feed* by M. T. Anderson (2002) and *Looking for Alaska* by John Green (2005), to demonstrate how young adult literature interplays with dominant ideas of adolescence/ts. Specifically, we explore how these texts both critique and re-inscribe normative distinctions between adolescents and adults and examine how such distinctions affect the subsequent relations between youth and adults.

Given their status within biological and psychological discourses as “incomplete” and “emerging toward adulthood,” youth are often positioned as inferior to and dependent upon adults. In this way, adults not only embody the destination and goal of adolescence, but also are called upon to guide youth in their proper development toward adulthood. The responsibility of youth, in this model, centers on accepting and abiding by adult-set rules and guidelines and improving the mind and body in the movement toward adulthood.

Through this framing, youth may rebel against such standards as part of their overall “normal” development (e.g., Trites, 2000). In many respects, the image of the rebellious teenager constitutes one of the hallmarks of commonsensical ideas of adolescence. Perhaps the quintessential embodiment of the idea can be found in the iconic figures of Holden Caulfield from J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Jim Stark, James Dean’s character in the film *Rebel without a Cause* (Weisbart & Ray, 1955). As in these depictions, youth are often understood to be in opposition to adults and adult authority, preferring to find ac-

ceptance and understanding within their distinct peer culture, thereby reinforcing the “confident characterization” of peer-orientedness in teens (Lesko, 2012).

Such views reinforce the perception of differences, however arbitrary, between youth and adults and the idea that these differences involve sharp demarcations between these life categories. However, viewing adolescence as a cultural construct denaturalizes these

normative expectations by asking questions about what constitutes adulthood and adolescence and how these definitions and distinctions get developed and perpetuated. In other words, a denaturalized view of adolescence does not take as inevitable the typical ways youth and adults are positioned in relation to one another or the designations assigned to each category. In our analysis of M. T. Anderson’s *Feed* and John Green’s

Looking for Alaska, we emphasize how these texts play into and/or push against normative expectations for youth and the resulting depictions of and relations with the adults around them.

Specifically, our analysis of *Feed* focuses on how the novel disappoints and disrupts our social expectation that adults serve as mature guides to youth, thus deepening the critique of society’s dependence on information fed to us through the media and even school. By disrupting normative youth–adult relations, Anderson relegates “adolescence” not to a particular group of age-bound people, but rather to anyone—youth and adults alike—who embody particularly puerile ways of being in the novel. By divorcing age from the concept of adolescence, Anderson employs stereotypical adolescence as a metaphor in the service of his themes against passive consumption and not thinking critically about the world. In this way, adults are not the guides for youth development; rather, their juvenile acts are as much the subject of critique as are those of youth in this dystopian text.

Our analysis of *Looking for Alaska* focuses on how the novel both re-inscribes normative understandings of youth–adult relations (e.g., youth in

opposition to and rebellious toward adults) even as it offers possibilities for rethinking these relations by offering a spectrum of divergent depictions of youth–adult relations, some of which counter hierarchal, adversarial positioning. By offering this cross section of relations, the novel demonstrates how adolescence does not cohere around a set of natural behaviors, but rather as a set of performances shaped, in part, by the expectations established by adults (and the subject positions, or how people identify themselves and their roles in a particular space, available to adolescents in relation to these adults).

By looking across these two novels, our analyses reveal how designations of age, distinctions between adolescence/ts and adulthood/adults, and expectations for youth–adult relationships are contingent upon and constitutive of the contexts in which they occur, rather than functioning as a set of norms emerging intrinsically from a naturally occurring stage of life. Through these analyses, then, we are making a case for how young adult texts function ideologically as cultural artifacts—that is, how they work to reinforce and/or critique broader cultural ideas of adolescence/ts. These analyses exemplify a particular approach for reading, interpreting, and teaching young adult literature that focuses on exposing and disrupting how ideological norms tied to common ways of understanding adolescence/ts circulate within these texts. In our conclusion, we further explicate this critical approach—an interpretive method that we refer to as a *Youth Lens*. A *Youth Lens* joins an emerging body of scholarship (e.g., Sarigianides, Lewis, & Petrone, 2015; Thein, Sulzer, & Schmidt, 2013; Waller, 2009) that centralizes questions tied to the representations of youth and conceptions of adolescence within young adult literature.

We selected *Feed* and *Looking for Alaska* for specific reasons. First, we chose these two particular texts for their popularity and critical acclaim: Green’s novel was honored with the Michael L. Printz Award, and Anderson’s novel was a finalist for the National Book Award. Award-winning and award-recognized texts typically get extra exposure among readers, especially those in schools, so examining representations of youth in these texts allows us to see the kinds of images of adolescents circulating within popular and educational contexts. Second, we chose these two novels for their distinctive representations of adolescence/ts, especially as they relate to adult characters—

depictions we will take up in our specific analyses below. In other words, these texts do not necessarily represent emblematic instantiations of a certain phenomenon present in the entire genre of young adult literature. Rather, the utility of these texts lies in their ability to illustrate a distinct interpretive move for literary analysis—namely, how young adult literature can perpetuate and/or subvert normative ideas of adolescence through depictions of adolescent–adult relationships. Furthermore, while both novels have been lauded for their contributions to young adult literature, little scholarship has examined their portrayals of adolescence/ts. Finally, these two texts have been particularly fruitful for exposing our preservice and inservice teachers to literary analyses focused upon representations of youth and adolescence. Therefore, our hope is that this article provides fresh readings of these two texts and, in doing so, draws attention to how reconceptions of adolescence as a cultural construct can help illuminate new interpretative possibilities for young adult literature and offer secondary students and teachers ways of reading representations of youth more critically.

Critiquing Adults and Youth as “Adolescents” in *Feed*

In *Feed*, Anderson’s futuristic satire, adolescence functions literally and figuratively. Although the novel is populated by school-age youth, behaviors “confidently characterizing” adolescence (Lesko, 2012)—vanity, vacuity, fleeting interests in fun, and peer-orientedness—designate youth *and* all but one of the adults depicted in the novel. In this way, Anderson untethers the presentation of adolescence from age, and in doing so, utilizes the social category metaphorically to satirize any “adolescent” who matches its thin, familiar set of behaviors and uncritical frame of mind. In other words, the adults are adolescents, too. Hence, Anderson’s novel reveals adolescence rooted not within biological imperatives and expectations or available only to a specific age-bound group of people, but rather the donning of certain behaviors (available to anyone) within a particular sociocultural context. *Feed* challenges commonsensical understandings of adolescence that view it as a life stage automatically shed through a person’s natural maturation.

Feed’s future setting includes technology that permits individuals to embed an Internet connection

directly into their heads so that they need not talk to communicate. Instead, they can speak through their feed devices, competing for banner space with corporations and government organizations also bombarding them with messages and advertisements.

To show the result of such technological development, the novel opens with a group of school-aged youth trained on texting who speak in minimized slang devoid of figurative richness: “‘I’m so null,’ and Marty was all, ‘I’m null too, unit’” (p. 3). To keep from being bored, the group fervently seeks out sources of entertainment in the form of advertisements about places to visit while on a moon vacation, and they remain persistently preoccupied with the products “bannered” to them.

Through these opening scenes, Anderson appears to mock young people’s blind consumption of products, their vain interest in their appearance, and their lack of interest in political or ecological matters of weight.

Expecting to see adults enter the scene as the wise authorities in juxtaposition to youthful folly, readers are surprised: Anderson depicts most of the adults through equally, if not more, diminished language and preoccupations. The protagonist, Titus, and his friends get hacked and end up in the hospital while on a moon vacation over spring break. When Titus’s father arrives to visit him after the hacking incident that shut down their feeds, readers await his responsible answers to Titus’s questions about what happened to all of them during this traumatic experience. Instead, he replies: “‘This is . . . Dude,’ he said. ‘Dude, this is some way bad shit’” (p. 55). Wired to the feed himself, Titus’s dad has to be reminded to speak to his son “in the air” rather than through the feed. He is as much beholden to the feed for his ideas about ecol-

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ogy, politics, and norms of socializing as is his son; neither was ever taught the importance of thinking

Anderson presents adolescence as a set of behaviors resulting from a passive acceptance of how feeds tell people to think, to believe, to look, and to be, clearly illustrating how adolescence is a category created as much by outside sociocultural forces as by internal biological imperatives.

critically about social messages relayed through their feeds.

Titus's father also reveals his "adolescence," as defined by stereotypical immature behaviors, in his relationship with his son. For example, at the end of an argument over suing the nightclub that caused the malfunction of Titus's and his friends' feeds, the father tells his son that he is acting like a brat; yet his behavior could be construed as being at least as brattish as his son's. He says,

"Now maybe you better take the girl home. In the new up-car. With the keys I just held out in my palm like a gift. Oh, because it was a gift."

My father got up all pissy and took the dishes into the kitchen. He rattled them against the rim of the junktube as he threw them away. They crashed down into the thing, the incinerator. (p. 105)

Through his text-based word choice, sarcastic tone, and "pissy" behavior, one might hardly consider the father's handling of the argument as following adult expectations, or expectations socially defined as exemplifying mature responses to a confrontation. Rather, most readers would probably ascribe the way the father storms away from the table and intentionally creates a disturbance with the dishes as "adolescent" responses to losing an argument. In this scene, Titus acts similarly, dismissing his parents' desire to sue the nightclub with a curt "whatev" and ending the argument by calling "quits" (p. 105). Both Titus and his father use language and take on characteristics society tends to associate with adolescence. Therefore, the interaction reveals how socially constructed identifiers function to label anyone, no matter his/her age, as an adolescent. In all of these depictions, both youth *and* adults are vulnerable to and enact tendencies typically marking adolescence.

In Anderson's hands, stereotyped adolescence is a state of being that threatens the natural, political, and interpersonal world; it must be avoided for this world to survive and to flourish. Anderson demonstrates this point through politically savvy Violet, Titus's new girlfriend. She and her father refuse to accept what the mainstream feeds of news and corporations tell them, insisting on knowing other languages and following alternative news sources to take up a resistant and critical position in relation to corporate society. With his wife, Violet's dad decided to homeschool Violet as a child and to keep her unplugged from the feed so that she could think for herself and analyze the world thoughtfully. Only when he sees how disadvantaged he was professionally, and how difficult it was for him to secure work in this technologically wired environment, did Violet's father succumb to get Violet "wet-wired" so that she could have a more "normal" life. In the novel, this late wiring is what causes her feedware to malfunction, and her patterns of resistance to advertisements and failure to purchase in response to ads ultimately cast her as unworthy of assistance. The corporations allow her to die. A dangerous thinker who intends to take action against the corporations, Violet cannot be permitted to survive. In Anderson's text, individuals alone cannot fight a culture of feed-dependency or corporate dominance. Rather, in the novel's closing words, "everything must go" to effect a change that is widespread enough to reach all of its citizens.

By denigrating "adolescent" acts as thoughtlessness regardless of the character's age, Anderson critiques the behaviors attached (by adults) to youth and shows them to be avoidable rather than inevitable. But even more, by showing the homogeneity of both adolescent-aged youth and adolescent-behaved adults, all connected by the feed of corporate media, Anderson presents adolescence as a set of behaviors resulting from a passive acceptance of how feeds tell people to think, to believe, to look, and to be, clearly illustrating how adolescence is a category created as much by outside sociocultural forces as by internal biological imperatives. Therefore, adolescence remains undesignated by a biological stage, functioning instead as a frame of mind that humanity is suffering through at this time, but not by necessity. Anderson warns us that "adolescence"—as a constructed set of behaviors resulting from the onslaught of messages directed at all of us—must be resisted.

Rebellion and Respect in Relation to Adult Social Roles in *Looking for Alaska*

Whereas *Feed* breaks conventional designations and expectations for adolescence and adulthood, as well as the relationships and hierarchies between adults and youth, *Looking for Alaska* adheres to many of the designations and expectations typically ascribed to youth and adults. At the same time, however, the novel offers more nuanced relations between youth and adults wherein many of the typical oppositional and hierarchal attributes of these relations either do not exist as powerfully as we might typically expect or do not exist at all. *Looking for Alaska* demonstrates how adolescent behaviors have as much to do with adult expectations of them as they do with any “natural” need for rebellion or opposition. Through the depictions of these varied adolescent–adult interactions, Green’s novel, similar to Anderson’s novel, establishes adolescence as a performance of identities informed by external expectations, relationships, and circumstances rather than as an intrinsic and normative set of imperatives. Furthermore, *Looking for Alaska* shows how ideas of and expectations for adolescence constrain and open up possible subject positions available to both youth and adults in their interpersonal relationships. In this way, Green’s novel both supports and subverts dominant understandings of youth and adolescence.

In *Looking for Alaska*, Green presents a story about a cohort of high school friends—primarily Pudge, the Colonel, and Alaska—enduring tragedy at their boarding school, Culver Creek. As these young people ponder existential questions about death and build interpersonal relationships, they also interact with several adult characters, each of whom is positioned uniquely in relation to the adolescent characters and with whom they interact differently. The most stereotypical adult character, The Eagle (a rather ironic nickname because the man sees little), is the dean of students at Culver Creek. In general, he exemplifies an understanding of youth as rebellious. In his introduction to Pudge, for example, he says, “Welcome to Culver Creek, Mr. Halter. You’re given a large measure of freedom here. If you abuse it, you’ll regret it. You seem like a nice young man. I’d hate to have to bid you farewell” (p. 21). In this pithy statement, the Eagle establishes strict parameters on the “freedom” given to the students and that expulsion for breaking

these parameters is a real consequence. The characterization of the Eagle as an adult who understands that adolescents need rules and discipline because they are inherently incapable of maintaining their own growth re-inscribes notions of youth as lacking a certain level of maturity and capability.

Of course, this characterization is particularly ironic in Green’s novel because the main adolescent protagonists—while enacting certain transgressive behaviors (e.g., drinking, smoking, sexual promiscuity)—are all talented individuals who are self-motivated to do well academically

and, in many instances, defy normative expectations of youth regarding maturity. Yet throughout the novel, Pudge and his cohort of friends consistently break the rules set by the Eagle—more because they seem to be following certain norms of the school that state students should break rules and pull pranks than because they are enacting some inherent trait of adolescence. We argue that this rule-establishing

by the Eagle (the responsible adult) illustrates the larger social understandings about youth as rebels, and it is against this social norm that the adolescents seemingly rail. In this way, the role of the Eagle defines certain ritualized performances—available both to the students under his purview and to himself—which, in this case, conform to commonsensical notions of adolescent–adult relationships.

In contrast, Dr. Hyde, the religious studies teacher, offers a more complex depiction of an adult character in relation to youth. On the one hand, Hyde typifies the stereotypical authoritative teacher: he refuses to provide his first name (actually making a point of asserting this during the first class), utilizes a transmission-oriented pedagogical approach, and dismisses Pudge for daydreaming during class. In general, he makes himself inaccessible to the youth, and they do not view him as a possible role model. Instead, they refer to him as the “Old Man” and ridicule him for both his age and health issues. Even Pudge, who confesses to Alaska that he admires Dr.

***Looking for Alaska* shows how ideas of and expectations for adolescence constrain and open up possible subject positions available to both youth and adults in their interpersonal relationships.**

Hyde's brilliance, maintains his interpersonal distance from Hyde rather than embracing him as a personal or professional mentor. In these ways, Hyde attempts to hold to rigid, normative adult-youth hierarchal relationships.

At the same time, Hyde identifies his students as passionate learners who have the capacity to answer complex existential questions; consequently, he extends intense challenges to them, inviting them to grapple with religious spirituality. In many ways, Hyde's teaching facilitates Pudge's inquiries and his journey of selfhood in a way that honors his ability to find his own answers to life's most difficult questions. In fact, Hyde centralizes youths' ideas and interests in his curriculum by integrating Alaska's question from the midterm ["How will we ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?" (p. 158)] into the final exam to help the students process their suffering. This multifaceted dynamic between Hyde and his students reveals how adolescent-adult interactions need not lead to adversarial relationships (as seen with the Eagle), but can result in a relationship in which youth and adults, while perhaps involving some mockery and interpersonal distance, show respect for one another and demonstrate the need for each other as part of sustaining healthy lives.

In comparison to the Eagle and Dr. Hyde, the relationships in the novel between young people and their parents offer non-normative depictions of youth-adult relations. In both the relationships between Pudge and his parents and the Colonel and his mother, normative hierarchical expectations of adults guiding youth do not exist. Both Pudge's and the Colonel's parents respect their sons, trust their decisions, and at different times "cover" for their children so they can maintain their good standing at Culver Creek. While neither the Colonel's mother nor Pudge's parents completely understand their sons (the Colonel's mother does not understand her son's intellect; Pudge's parents are oblivious to his social isolation prior to attending Culver Creek), they honor and support them and, by and large, have good, non-adversarial relationships with them.

These parents expect their sons to engage in behavior and pursue endeavors beneficial to their academic and social status. For instance, when covering for or being complicit in their children's pranks and transgressive behavior, these parents reveal their understanding that their children are self-motivated

and would not engage in activities that would hinder their opportunities at school. When Pudge asks his father to play a part in their "Alaska Young Memorial Prank," his father momentarily worries about Pudge getting into trouble. Yet, it only takes Pudge to declare that he will avoid any trouble or any danger for his father to agree to lie to the Eagle as part of setting the stage for the prank. By collaborating with rather than restricting his son, Pudge's father opens a different expectation for adolescent-adult interactions—one based upon a respectful understanding for the creative and industrious capabilities of youth. Again, this event follows a long tradition of student pranks at Culver Creek, illustrating that engaging in such behavior is not inherent to adolescence but, rather, to the school's traditions for its adolescent students, thereby reinforcing the ways that institutions carve out "adolescent" expectations that youth fulfill.

By looking across the depictions of adults within the text, as well as the expectations for youth tied to each of them, Green's novel reveals a spectrum of possibilities for youth-adult relationships, some of which reveal adversarial relationships and some of which reveal collaborative, non-hierarchal relations. In showcasing these various possibilities, *Looking for Alaska* demonstrates ideas about and experiences of adolescence as context-dependent—how these youth characters take up or embody being an adolescent varies, depending upon their relations with adults and the expectations and roles available within those relationships. More significantly, though, the novel reveals how dominant ideas of adolescence/ts (as represented through the relations between the Eagle and the youth) constrain—and help to recapitulate—adversarial, oppositional, and ultimately diminishing relations between youth and adults, whereas non-dominant ideas of adolescence/ts engender more equitable, respectful, and mutual relations between youth and adults. Green's novel, then, reestablishes and problematizes commonsensical understandings of both adolescents and the adults who hold a prominent presence in their lives.

Implications for Reading and Teaching Young Adult Literature

Joined analytically by their emphasis on youth-adult relations and normative designations and distinctions between adolescence and adulthood, these two analy-

ses illustrate how expectations for such relations and designations—for example, the interrupted expectation for adults to take on the role of wise authorities in *Feed*—both afford and constrain particular subject positions and ways of relating available to both adolescents and adults. In addition, these analyses demonstrate that contextual factors figure more significantly in the possibilities open to adolescent–adult relationships than do biological and psychological capacities typically associated with adolescence and adults’ roles in adolescents’ lives.

Further, by examining these two texts for their representations of adolescence/ts, our analysis exemplifies ways teachers and students can reconsider their own readings of young adult literature by questioning the explicit and implicit messages about youth that the genre imparts. For example, simply reading *Looking for Alaska* as a coming-of-age story about adolescents contending with the death of a friend unnecessarily devalues the capacities of the Colonel and Pudge to consider the ramifications of death and dying as two youth *already* of age. Also, by not exploring youth behaviors in relation to adult expectations, assumptions that these characters are simply being “typically rebellious” adolescents could easily be reinforced. Similarly, ignoring the way *Feed* employs stereotypical adolescence as the means to offer a scathing critique of a lack of criticality in relation to “feeds” in the world results in an incomplete understanding of the novel’s commentary on the passivity of *all* consumers—adolescents and adults alike.

Ultimately, this approach to engaging young adult literature leads us to a way of interpreting texts that emphasizes critical questions about representations of youth, the effects that contexts and identities have on young peoples’ behavior, and figurative uses of “adolescence” in texts. Although in recent years many scholars within literacy education have closely analyzed young adult literature for its representations of social categories such as gender, race, and disability (e.g., Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller, & Picot, 2010; Curwood, 2013; Kokkola, 2011), an essential aspect of interrogating young adult texts—namely, examining representations of adolescence/ts as a distinct social category—is still missing within literacy education. To address this gap, our analyses of these two texts employ a distinct critical lens for interpretative examinations of young adult literature, an approach we term a *Youth Lens*.

Elsewhere, we have explicated further the many dimensions and possibilities of this lens (Petronne, Sarigianides, & Lewis, 2015). Briefly, this lens both explores how texts depict people labeled *adolescents* and circulates ideas about the stage of life known as *adolescence*. Implementing this lens provides avenues for resistant readings of young adult literature by secondary-aged students and complicates critical, multifaceted approaches to literature curriculum for middle and high school English language arts classrooms. As well, we concur with Trites’s (2000) argument that youth need to be equipped with tools (i.e., a poststructural perspective) to help them resist the normative messages that young adult literature propagates.

We see a *Youth Lens* as being just this tool for its emphasis on how depictions of youth and adolescence create ways in which students (and teachers) can more critically examine how literary texts—as well as broader cultural texts, practices, and discourses (including schools and curricula)—name and figure them as youth. For example, secondary students could be asked to list typical “adult” behaviors next to typical “adolescent” behaviors in a Venn diagram. They could then be invited to consider which behaviors could be moved to the overlapping space based on personal experiences or textual evidence from fiction. In such an activity, students might offer that adults are more responsible than youth, yet be able to indicate examples of peers or fictional characters who keep regular jobs and contribute to the family income. Based on this beginning, students could be tasked with studying several young adult texts for how the stories depict not only youth but also the adults in the novel, considering questions such as: Are youth presented as fundamentally different from adults, or do some youth and adults share traits? What messages about being a youth do the texts seem to propagate?

This approach to engaging young adult literature leads us to a way of interpreting texts that emphasizes critical questions about representations of youth, the effects that contexts and identities have on young peoples’ behavior, and figurative uses of “adolescence” in texts.

An extension or complication of this activity might involve an analysis of the fluctuating ways that both adults and youth behave in terms of maturity or responsibility. Similar to the way that queer theory offers readers a means of understanding that gender expression might fluctuate in individuals or characters from context to context, for example, so, too, might readers be invited to consider a nuanced analysis of real adults and youth and how their “mature” behavior shifts in response to a range of factors. Again, students might be invited to list behaviors typically considered “adult” and those typically regarded as “adolescent.” They might then be tasked with studying scenes of exchanges in their lives and taking notes on when adults and youth act “adult” and when both might act in ways generally regarded as “adolescent.” After discussing this more nuanced tapestry of behavior, readers could turn to young adult texts featuring adult–adolescent relations to examine when they reinforce stereotypical expectations of these relations and when they break with such expectations.

Thus, a *Youth Lens* promises literacy educators a powerful way to not only reread young adult literary texts, but also to engage their students in literary analysis and cultural critique that creates new possibilities to imagine more empowering subject positions—spaces in which to enact particular identities and/or roles—for both adults and youth.

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Addressing Assumptions about Adolescents in a Preservice YAL Course

“I thought you were just typical teenagers.”

“No one has ever called me typical. I can’t say I like it.”

—Sarah Nicolas, 2015, p. 158

For anyone who has ever taught teenagers, there is a strong temptation to congeal their quirky traits into one lump of coal. I say coal because our understanding of adolescents is usually filled with negative attributes of the unruly, rebellious, lazy sort. We seem to think teenagers belong on the proverbial “naughty” list. This deficit view around adolescents—one in which teens are perceived as being deficient or inherently flawed and in need of more knowledgeable others to guide them and/or lift them out of this incomplete and negative hole—is a too-prevalent theme discussed by adults and, more specifically and problematically, by teachers. As though an mp3 stuck on repeat on our iPhones, this single story about “typical” teens is hard to turn off. And as Chimamanda Adichie (2009) warns us in her TED talk, single stories are dangerous; they create “stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”

Throughout my career as an educator, I have heard this single story of young adults many times. Well-intentioned friends have even joked about or bluntly asked me why on earth I would want to teach middle or high school students, and they conclude that I must have been a saint to do so. I can guarantee that I am no saint, just as I can guarantee that not all,

in fact very few, of the students I encountered while teaching middle and high school were the devils my peers might think, despite the pervasive rhetoric.

Perhaps one might call me too optimistic about adolescents, since I hold the assumption that all teenagers can succeed and learn to love English language arts. However, if this is a flaw, I am happy to be guilty as charged. I am not naïve, though; I do know that some of my former students struggled in school, displayed inappropriate behaviors, or quite honestly were rude. However, I have always found the traits of my middle and high school students to be typical of humans, and not just of the adolescent variety. It is easy to say that teens are rude or apathetic, but I have met an equal number of adults who exhibit those traits. Part of the reason I have been and will continue to be adamant that the deficit view of teens is misinformed has to do with my own adolescent experience. Anyone who knew me as a teenager could attest to the fact that I was smart, conscientious, kind, hard working, and respectful of others. My story of being a teenager is not the one that is told in conversations among peers or shown in the media. There is a range of and diversity within adolescent experiences.

Although I wasn’t exposed to young adult literature as an adolescent, as a middle and high school English teacher, I began to get to know the genre and

witness how it offered perspectives that gave depth and breadth to the teenage story. Of course, like any good English teacher, I know it is important to be critical of the literature that students read and to think about the messages it may send, so now, as an educator of preservice secondary English teachers, I focus on those questions. I ask my preservice teachers to talk about what it means to teach young adults,

The preservice teachers in my course, although only a few years removed from being teenagers themselves, had already accepted as reality the lump of coal—the negative view of teenagers and the accompanying literature—into their educator stocking.

to question the deeply ingrained beliefs that they already have about teenagers, and to explore where those beliefs originated. For me, a good place to do this sort of work is in a young adult literature course.

I have taught Young Adult Literature (YAL) for preservice teachers for the past two years at the University of Georgia. This course is one of five that our undergraduates are required to take as preparation for their student teaching experience. The other four courses focus on methods and practicum field experiences. The YAL course both serves as the

final requirement to earn the English content teaching credential and provides a space to apply the methods with real literature before students become student teachers. The course on young adult literature is housed in our College of Education, as opposed to the English department; I make this distinction because the tone and tenor of such a class may be quite different depending on where it is housed. YAL course syllabi in an English department focus primarily on literary analysis, while those in an Education department focus more on application and pedagogy. Despite this binary distinction, I chose to do a bit of both. Due to my own experiences as an “atypical”—yet very typical—teenager, as I taught the course, I felt compelled to not only read and analyze YAL with my preservice teachers, but also to talk about the young adults who read these books and how to effectively approach YAL with them in the classroom.

Under my guidance, the course was both analytical and pedagogical, thus bridging the English world with the Education world. The class met 24 times (two times a week for 12 weeks). During this time, students participated in young adult book clubs, created lessons and units of instruction, and engaged in philosophical debates about the literary merits of YAL. They also read academic and practitioner-based articles about the themes and content of YAL and how one might teach and analyze various texts. For my undergraduate students, much of what I taught in this course was new. Many of them admitted that they had never read YAL before, and if they had read it, they felt they needed to do so “on the sly,” perceiving it as somehow not as good as the British, American, and World literature canonical texts they read in their English courses. Not only was the literature I was introducing to them new, the concept that English teachers can and should use YAL in their classrooms was something they had not considered before.

The only classes my students had taken related to the study of adolescents came in the form of their educational psychology courses, which focused on the developmental aspects of what it means to be a teen and often failed to paint adolescents as living entities. In a response paper to some of the YAL course readings on young adults and young adult literature, one of my students, Carrie (all names are pseudonyms), wrote, “Many of the articles shocked me.” This sentiment was repeated throughout the course by many of Carrie’s classmates. The preservice teachers in my course, although only a few years removed from being teenagers themselves, had already accepted as reality the lump of coal—the negative view of teenagers and the accompanying literature—into their educator stocking.

Considering Adolescence

“My overall conclusion might be that YA is the new punching bag for society’s fears about teens’ incipient adulthood. #giveteensmorecredit.”

—Andrea Cremer, 2011

People fear the unknown, and for many people, the seemingly chaotic, over-emotional, and impulsive behaviors of teens are mystifying. Moje and van Helden (2005) rightly ask, “What is it about adolescence that

leads people to fear that certain influences will prey on the alleged confusion, vulnerability, and crisis of youth?” (p. 211). Rather than seeing teens as troubled, I think it is important to trouble exactly what it means to be a teen in the United States. Instead of giving a detailed history lesson on the development of the concept of adolescence, I wish to highlight some of the key scholarly thoughts on this stage of life as a basis for understanding what my preservice teacher candidates and I discuss throughout the course.

Fundamental to thinking about young adults or adolescents is Nancy Lesko’s (2001) work on the cultural construction of adolescence. In her research, she found four “confident characteristics” (i.e., commonly held societal beliefs) of adolescence: 1) coming of age into adulthood, 2) being controlled by raging hormones, 3) being peer-oriented, and 4) being represented by age. Her work is fundamental in deconstructing how teenagers have been treated as stock characters over time by demonstrating how dominant ideas of adolescents are tied to a history of racism, sexism, and classism. Similarly, Vadeboncoeur (2005) argues that the discourse of adolescence “take[s] on colonial aspects” in that the “adolescent is cast as an objectified entity, in need of leadership, guidance, and control from the adult” (p. 5). Because adolescence has long been thought of as resulting from biological changes and psychological developments, the idea that this stage of life may be constructed, rather than natural, was not questioned. Yet, as Eckert (2004) stated, “Adolescence is not a natural life stage. It is quite peculiar to industrialized nations, where people approaching adulthood are segregated from the adult world, and confined to schools where they are expected to interact and identify primarily with those their own age” (p. 362). Similar arguments have been forwarded by numerous other researchers of adolescence: adolescence is a “historical anomaly” (Epstein, 2010, p. 41); the adolescent is a “fiction” (Vadeboncoeur, 2005, p. 6); adolescence “often functions as a discourse surrogate for broader social, political, and/or nationalistic agendas and concerns” (Petroni, Sarriganides, & Lewis, 2015, p. 510).

While it would be wrong to dismiss completely the psychological, biological, and developmental aspects of what it means to be a teenager, I think that these discourses have had the spotlight for far too long. Taking a social-constructivist stance on adoles-

cents helps teachers be critical of the ways in which institutions such as media, government, and education fashion teenagers in a deficit stance in ways that other views of adolescence cannot. This is important because, as Lewis and Petrone (2010) wrote, “[H]ow adolescence is understood significantly affects the ways young people are advocated for/with, intervened on behalf of, and organized and taught in schools” (p. 398). Because perceptions do affect our notions of others, it was important that in my YAL course, my preservice teachers engaged with the notion of the young adult before they delved into young adult literature. My hope was that by examining their own experiences as young adults, hearing alternative viewpoints about teenagers from other scholars and educators, and examining images and opinions of adolescents in popular culture that my preservice teachers would be able to think about their future students in more positive and productive ways.

Exploring Alternative Viewpoints

“I realized yet again how often I underestimate teens—how often we all underestimate them. I sometimes need an incident like this to remind me that teenagers are not bland, banal, perfected ciphers we see sleazing around the groves of So-Cal on HD-TV. Those are the teens created by panels of writers terrified to alienate any potential viewers. In reality, teens are conspicuously the opposite of bland and blank: They are incredibly eccentric, deeply impassioned about their interests, fantastically—even exhaustingly—knowledgeable on the subject of topics like, say, drum and bugle corps, or horse-riding, or the United Nations, or submarine warfare. Their commitment to complexity of thought is, if anything, fiercer than an adult’s—because they have to fight so fiercely to defend it.”

—M. T. Anderson, 2009

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In order to help my students think about adolescence/ ts in relation to our course on YAL, I had my preservice teachers engage in a variety of activities. I will discuss each of the activities here in order to show how other educators might explore similar topics in their YAL courses.

Grounding Their Understandings in the Personal

I first had my students partake in some reflective writing. I asked my undergraduate preservice teachers to think about adolescence, adolescents, teenagers, and young adults in relation to the following prompts, and then write a well-organized response:

1. Describe to me what being an adolescent is like. Hypothetically, how would you describe teenagers to someone who has never met them? What words or phrases come to mind?
2. What were your teenage years like? What were your interests? What do you think about this time in your life?
3. How does society portray teenagers in the news, media, and popular culture?
4. How do schools, teachers, principals, etc. tend to treat teenagers, in your opinion?

These questions allowed my students to reflect on their own belief systems prior to reading and responding to academic literature on the same topic. Students brought these responses to class, and we used them as a basis for a general discussion around their own perceptions of teens. As a common starting point, students came up to the whiteboard and engaged in a chalk-talk revolving around the words, phrases, and associations they generated related to adolescents. As the words filled the board, it became visually clear that their personal perceptions of teens were mostly negative and grounded in stereotypes. Elena's response exemplifies these ideas:

I think the media likes to represent teenagers as this entity defined by black hair-dye, spiked collar necklaces, smoking cigarettes and likely to have on eye-liner regardless of gender expression. When I was little, this is what I envisioned teenagers to be, and honestly, for some reason, that image was so entirely glamorous. I always wanted to be a rebel, but I never was. In many schools, I feel that teachers treat teenagers like the rebel, decked in black and chains.

Descriptions such as this were fruitful starting points for conversations about how these visions of adolescents have become prevalent. Because I had also

asked students to consider their own adolescent years in their written responses, I asked them whether they fit the stereotypes on the board. Elizabeth remarked, "I remember being taught that my teenage years would be a turbulent roller coaster of hormones and angst, but that was not my actual experience." What I attempted to show them, and Elizabeth and Elena seemed to understand, was that adolescence is *not* a universal experience. Instead, it is one that varies highly from person to person.

Grounding Their Understandings in the Academic

These discussions were just the beginning step in helping my preservice teachers consider young adults and the implicit assumptions they, as future educators, held. After taking a personal approach, the students then read various academic pieces and viewed a video to explore other people's beliefs about adolescents. Over a course of two weeks, students read and/or viewed the following:

- Lewis & Petrone's (2010) article, "'Although adolescence need not be violent . . .': Preservice teachers' connections between 'adolescence' and literacy curriculum"
- Excerpts from Epstein's (2010) book, *Teen 2.0: Saving our Children and Families from the Torment of Adolescence*
- YA author Laurie Halse Anderson's (2005) keynote speech, "Loving the young adult reader even when you want to strangle him (or her)!"
- YA author M. T. Anderson's (2009) Printz Honor Book Award speech, "On the Intelligence of Teens"
- Seigel's (2013) video, "Myths of Adolescence"

Each piece provided a counter-narrative to traditional and historical notions of what it means to be a young adult.

Upon reading and viewing, I again asked my students to reflect on their views of adolescents, posing the following questions:

1. What did you learn about teenagers/adolescents that you didn't know before reading/viewing these texts?
2. What myths did you initially buy into? How do you think these myths affect the ways in which we teach our students?
3. If you could redefine what an adolescent is based on your readings and new insights, what would you say now?

Although we began to address the misconceptions and assumptions about teens through personal experiences, these articles and video seemed to hit my students hard. Michael wrote that he “definitely bought into the myths” of adolescence discussed in Siegel’s (2013) video, and that learning “the teenage years were practically nonexistent a few hundred years ago was a lot to process at once. . . . It was strange to find out that something that you had always accepted as a universal truth was actually, to some extent, a creation of society.” Another astute student, Robert, confessed that he was subject to, in his words, “the tyranny of common sense” that led him to “many incorrect assumptions on adolescents.” Robert’s reflection ends with powerful thoughts on his newfound knowledge about the dangers of the construction of the adolescent as lazy and rebellious:

I think addressing the falsity of these myths to our students themselves is important. If students believe they are inherently inadequate and immature due to their adolescence, they will play into these myths by default, but if we empower them by showing that these myths are in fact myths, they will be motivated to live beyond them. The more we can show our students we believe in them, the more successful they will be.

While Robert’s response has the wonderful optimism of a new teacher who wants to conquer the world, I find it refreshing that he, and others in his cohort, will be entering this career not grumbling about the behaviors of students but, instead, championing them. Although these are but a few examples of the rich insights my students developed and articulated, it gives me hope that there will be more teacher candidates like Sarah who said, “If I could re-describe the teenage experience, I would consider it limitless.”

Analyzing Assumptions in Popular Culture

I could have stopped the discussion of adolescents with just personal and academic responses, but I felt that it was important to begin moving that discussion to a more broadly defined literacy. So, rather than jumping straight into reading young adult novels, we moved into an exploration of how teens are portrayed in popular culture, as evidenced in teen magazines and comic strips. I wanted my students to explore Moje and van Helden’s (2005) question: “What do popular discourses—everyday talk, images, and signs—communicate to people about what an adolescent is?” (p. 211).

TEEN MAGAZINES

As a part of our exploration of this question, I asked my preservice teachers to bring a teen magazine to class. I did not tell them what teen magazine to bring, only that they should bring one that they didn’t mind cutting up. I divided the class into four groups; each group was given a different topic to explore in relation to how these magazines portray the young adults who comprise their primary audience:

- Adolescent Intellectual/Academic Interests
- Adolescent Social Life/Personal Interests
- Adolescent Problems/Crises
- Adolescent Relationships

Students worked in their groups, looking through their teen magazines for words and images that helped exemplify how the magazines portrayed teenagers relative to their assigned category. Students then created a collage on poster paper of what they were seeing.

I offer two examples of what my students created. In Figure 1, students assembled a collage of words and a few images that convey some of the conceptions of what the problems and crises of adolescents



Figure 1. Teen magazine collage of “Adolescent Problems and Crises”

entail. Students noted that they found lots of images and words related to body image, peer pressure, gossip, relationships, and school. A cursory glance at the overall message of this particular poster literally elicits the word “UGH . . .,” seen in the upper right hand corner of the poster, and perhaps even a guttural sigh. Not surprisingly, my preservice teachers noted that adolescent problems and crises were portrayed in overly dramatic ways, making teenagers appear to be druggies, bullies, and highly superficial, tuned out, and anxious individuals.

In a second example (see Fig. 2), my preservice teachers explored what teen magazines had to say about adolescent academic or intellectual interests. Unfortunately, as the collage demonstrates, what they found generally failed to promote academics or intellect in thoughtful ways. Instead, they identified articles on how to excel at looking good in appropriate school outfits and keeping up with beauty regimens, as indicated by the advice to “ace your face” and the guide to essential make-up that should go in one’s backpack. Although there were some serious clippings about books some teens might want to read, the overall message about school was that it was about maintaining a persona and that school and academics were hard and therefore not fun.

Students in all four of the groups noticed that adolescents were portrayed in a less than positive light, tending toward superficiality. Many were disturbed that they had not ever noticed these subtle (or not so

subtle) messages before. My preservice teachers also discussed the large gaps in content within these teen magazines. Several students noted that almost all the pictures and stories in the magazines were of White, middle- and upper-class, heterosexual students. This brought up very thoughtful conversation about the target audience for the magazines and their purpose in our society. Although there were a few preservice teachers in my courses who identified as non-White, none of them brought in a magazine that depicted teens of their race or ethnicity. In addition, most teen magazines were aimed at girls, and some of my male students said that they had a hard time finding teen magazines for young men other than *Sports Illustrated Kids*, which technically isn’t a gender-specific magazine. When asking my preservice teachers if these collages represented who they were as teenagers, most acknowledged that they did not find much in common with the portrayals.

COMIC STRIPS

In addition to analyzing teen magazines, I also had my students look at how adolescents are portrayed in comic strips. Comics are meant to be funny and usually do poke fun at or satirize societal issues, but sometimes they can also highlight dominant ideologies. Two comic strips written from a young adult perspective that I have found particularly useful to analyze are *Zits* by Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman and *Family Tree* by Signe Wilkinson. According to the Comics Kingdom website, “*Zits* centers on Jeremy Duncan, a self-absorbed teenager, as he endures the insecurities, hormones, and hilarity of adolescence. *Zits* depicts both teenage and parental angst like no other comic strip” (<http://comicskingdom.com/zits/2015-09-10>). *Family Tree* is described on the Cartoonist Group website as “tackling everything from shopaholic teens to the real differences between girls and boys”; it is “a groundbreaking family comedy that draws on Wilkinson’s wit (and her years of close personal experience with teenagers)” (<http://www.cartoonistgroup.com/properties/familytree/>). Before even looking at the two comic strips, these brief overviews indicate very clear assumptions about the young adult experience.

Almost any single comic within these comic strip series could be used to analyze the societal construction of adolescence. However, I will discuss two, of many, that my preservice teachers deconstructed in



Figure 2. Teen magazine collage of “Adolescent Academic Interests”

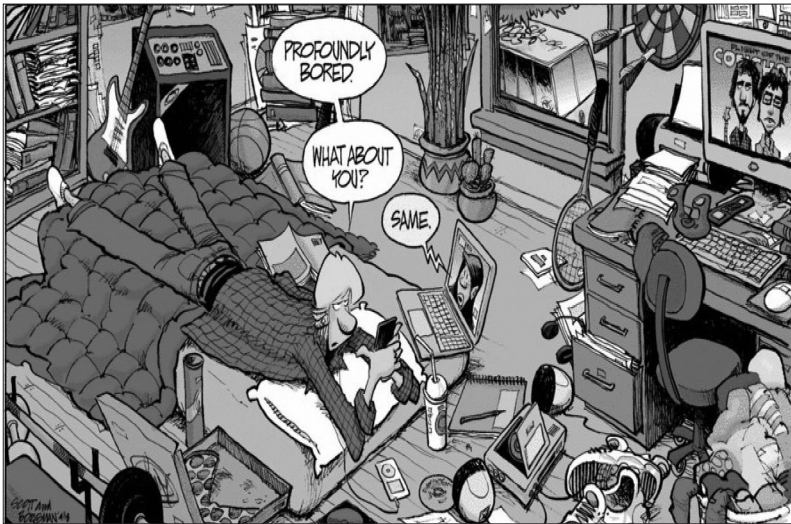


Figure 3. *Zits* by Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman, April 18, 2010. *Zits* ©Zits Partnership. All rights reserved.

my YAL course. The first (see Fig. 3) depicts Jeremy in the middle of his bedroom surrounded by numerous technologies, games, and books, yet he claims he is bored. In the second (see Fig. 4), Twig Tree—yes, that is her name—talks to her friend on the phone about a bunch of activities she is trying to get done all at once, including doing a science project, reading English homework, and figuring out what to wear for the upcoming dance.

I asked my students to analyze each comic strip in terms of society’s perceptions about adolescence and then to explore how this message is potentially inaccurate based on their reading and our previous class activities. For example, students in one group discussed the *Zits* comic strip, noting the irony in the

fact that Jeremy has a lot of items surrounding him—iPod, basketball, guitar, computer, book, dartboard, weights, etc.—that could ease his boredom. Lisa, one of my preservice teachers, described this phenomenon through the hashtag #firstworldproblems. Other members of her group commented that the *Zits* comic “demonstrates the stereotype that teenagers easily lose interest, even though there is a plethora of stimuli around them.” Students in this group also drew from the readings, arguing that this comic portrays “a huge generalization; M. T. Anderson mentions about the common mistake we make when we underestimate teens. . . . [H]e wrote ‘how often we all

underestimate them . . . they are incredibly eccentric, deeply impassioned about their interests.’”

Another group examined the *Family Tree* comic. Students noted that Twig’s dialogue suggests she is more concerned with her clothing than her studies. However, when they thought about the panels more, they came to a more complex interpretation. Carrie described the images in this way:

In the first panel, she appears to be looking at her picture frame and her book simultaneously. However, in the third panel we see that she is actually oriented more toward her book, and the picture frame is closer to the trash can. In the final panel, only the book is in the frame. This implies that while she is most concerned with her social image, most of her time is actually consumed with her studies (as represented by the book).



Figure 4. *Family Tree* by Signe Wilkinson, October 27, 2008. *Family Tree* ©Signe Wilkinson. All rights reserved.

Across the board, my preservice teachers were able to examine the stereotypical images found in the portrayal of adolescents in *Zits* and *Family Tree* and offer counter-narratives to those viewpoints. Their

Several students commented that they believed the authors who were the most successful at challenging the stereotypical portrayals of teens were those whose protagonists were not cast as victims or did not make readers feel sorry for them.

analysis of both magazines and comic strips supported other research about the construction of adolescence in popular culture. Moje and van Helden (2005) write, “Popular culture is all too often reduced to crazy stuff that kids listen to, watch, and wear”; they also state that young people are represented as “caring about nothing and nobody else and living their lives in a swirl of brands, logos, music, television, film, and Internet pages” (p. 214). By having my preservice teachers first read and

analyze images of adolescents in popular culture texts, such as comic strips and teen magazines, I helped scaffold their abilities to engage critically with the YAL we read throughout the course.

Connecting the Young Adult to Young Adult Literature

“The stories we like define us. They embody our experiences, hopes, fears, and dreams. Dismiss a person’s stories, and you dismiss that person. If we encourage kids to enter adult territories through the vehicle of literature, and to value what they find there, shouldn’t we repay the courtesy now and again with a visit back to the realms of childhood and adolescence? . . . What better way to convince a teenager of the importance of her views, the validity of her feelings and concerns, than to say to her: ‘I like your stories. They’re interesting. They’re good. And . . . can I borrow that book when you’re done?’”

—Jennifer Donnelly, 2004

As preservice teachers in my YAL course began to read young adult novels, many for the first time, they

were better able to understand the value of the young adult perspective and the literature named after its readership. More important, they also learned that just because a book is categorized as “young adult,” not every student will connect with it. One student, Sarah, posited that “every young adult has experiences that make them unique. Not all students can relate to or identify with content the same way. It is important to keep an open mind when assuming how students will react to literary works and characters.” Furthermore, since we had already critically analyzed magazines and comic strips, my students were able to think about their selected young adult novels through an adolescent lens. Of course, many teachers already use literary lenses, such as feminism, Marxism, and reader response, as described in Deborah Appleman’s (2009) book, *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents*. A Youth Lens (see Petrone, Sarigianides, & Lewis, 2015) is just another tool that my students acquired and were able to tap into throughout the semester.

Students read a total of seven different YAL texts, although they were exposed to over 50 by the end of the course (see Appendix A for a list of texts/authors students chose from). During each of their book club meetings and throughout the subsequent book blogs they wrote, my preservice teachers used the activities around young adults as a springboard to analyze and critique the ways in which adolescents were portrayed in the novels. Several students commented that they believed the authors who were the most successful at challenging the stereotypical portrayals of teens were those whose protagonists were not cast as victims or did not make readers feel sorry for them. Instead, the characters were portrayed as agentive and empowered. For example, in response to the book *The Skin I’m In* (2007) by Sharon Flake, Elizabeth wrote that Maleeka, the main character, “became empowered through the voice of Akeelma,” a character Maleeka created in her writing. Elizabeth argued that Maleeka’s character helped to show “that young Black women are not one dimensional like the media wants them to be.” Similarly, Kara was able to critique the novel *Wintergirls* (2009) by Laurie Halse Anderson as another young adult literature text that showed the agentive and empowered teen, as opposed to the “typical story of ‘damsel in distress saved by xyz’” Kara noted that the main character’s recognition of “her own

inner strength” and “deciding to live . . . is important for any adolescent to gain.”

Other preservice teachers talked about how YAL opened up their minds to “othered” stories and revealed their own biases toward certain groups of people. Lacey had an epiphany about the single story she had about Mexican Americans as she read Gary Soto’s *Buried Onions* (2006):

While reading the novel, I had to reframe my ignorant mindset more than once. Despite our lessons on the dangers of a single story, I found myself noticing the difference between my Mexican friends from Georgia and the Mexican Americans from California. Honestly, I found myself concluding that I must be wrong about the Mexican Americans I know on a more personal level. They must be more like the gang members in the novel than they let on. I am ashamed to say it took me so long in the novel to realize I had fallen prey to such an ignorant, lazy, and harmful mindset. After reframing my thinking, my views about my friends and Eddie [the main character] became more complex. This occurrence goes to show how important multicultural young adult literature is in the classroom among minorities and White students alike.

Both Bennett and Robert commented on how *Monster* (2008) by Walter Dean Meyers also challenged misconceptions about adolescents, in particular how society views African American adolescents. Robert wrote, “Similar to what we have been discussing in class, this book made me think of the role of prejudice. We have been talking about the many misconceptions about adolescents, and this book made me think of that in light of the many misconceptions about Black culture.” During the book club discussions, students connected these ideas to current events surrounding Black teens. The discussion was difficult but timely, given the tragic incidents involving teens Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown and countless other recent news stories.

Furthermore, students found that successful YAL offered counter-narratives to those typically told about teenagers and/or specific groups of people. For example, Kara noted that Jacqueline Woodson’s novel *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* (1994) turns “stereotypical race roles . . . on [their] head and places White people of the community in a position of poverty.” When considering *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012) by Stephen Chbosky, Lynn noted that “theoretically, [Charlie, the main character] is your aver-

age heterosexual, middle class White boy,” but the beauty of the novel for her was that it “authentically portray[ed] an aspect of the human struggle that is rarely identified: the trauma of those who remain in the background.” Similarly, Liv and other preservice teachers in her book club discussion group commented on how David Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy* (2013) “plays off the old adage ‘boy meets girl,’ a story trope that permeates our media and the stories the human race has been telling for centuries. . . . The only difference is, this time, it’s a homosexual relationship.” Students thought that the make-believe world that Levithan created offers a counter-narrative to the traditional love story—a story that often negates the stories of LGBTQ youth.

Overall, my students came to an appreciation of young adult literature that I don’t think would have occurred had they not spent significant time thinking and reflecting on the societal and personal construction of adolescents. One student, Elizabeth, had an impassioned response quite similar to that of YA author Jennifer Donnelly. She argued:

By using YA novels in English instruction, we can give adolescents the representation in literature that they crave. We can empower them to challenge the stereotypes of not only youth, but race, class, and gender. Young Adult Literature taught me, and still teaches me, that I can break the mold. I can make foolish, selfish decisions and yet still care about social justice. I can be strangely enthusiastic about explicating poetry and still get the guy. I can embody all the idiosyncrasies of personhood at age 12, 17, 21 and beyond because I am a whole person. One of my greatest victories as a teacher would be to make my students believe that they are whole people, too.

Another student, Lacey, argued that “ultimately, the perspective of teenagers as people, instead of tall children that are simply to be dealt with, must be the foundation of literary education. Treating adolescent literature with respect and attention is the first step.” It was my sincere hope that in my YAL course, my students would make these connections between young adults and young adult literature, and by all accounts, they did.

Conclusion

“We need to quit whining about teenagers and begin to celebrate them instead.”

—Laurie Halse Anderson, 2005

I feel that a young adult literature course that doesn't address the young adult in some meaningful way is a course that is not fulfilling its full responsibility.

Overall, I feel that a young adult literature course that doesn't address the young adult in some meaningful way is a course that is not fulfilling its full responsibility. Some researchers have found that preservice teachers hold potentially negative dominant conceptions of adolescence (Lewis & Petrone, 2010; Petrone & Lewis, 2012) that include coming-of-age narratives around identity formation, deficit views, and discourse that sees adolescence as a dangerous and tumultuous time,

thus serving to distance or other themselves from their future students. However, I found that when my students were given space to carefully examine their own beliefs, academic texts that offer alternative viewpoints, and examples of adolescence in popular culture—as well as to explore how these play out in young adult literature—they, for the most part, were able to move beyond negative conceptions of adolescence. Petrone et al. (2015) support these efforts, stating that when instructors “engage their students in analysis of a range of media texts and cultural artifacts,” there is “the potential to help students develop their understandings of adolescence as a construct and how media texts and cultural artifacts participate in the process of naming and knowing adolescence/ts” (p. 528).

Of course, not all students get there. For example, even after a semester of thinking about young adults and young adult literature, David still believed that “the adolescent experience *requires* a search for identity. It is a right-of-passage [sic] into the adult world, and adolescent students *struggle* to find their place amidst that transition” (italics added). However, the greater portion of my undergraduate students did have a change in opinion and addressed the assumptions about adolescence they previously held. Andrea summed this up well when she stated, “Adolescence, after all, does not have to be a period of darkness, and while it may contain an immeasurable amount of growth, this growth can take so many positive forms rather than the presumed dangerous, raging-hormone

period of life that is simply inevitable and something that one must survive in order to achieve.” Just as Lesko (2001) concluded when she delved into the confident characteristics of adolescents, I agree that “we must seek to advocate for young adults and children in new ways” (p. 194), and I believe the Young Adult Literature course provided an effective place to do it.

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Appendix A:

YAL Book/Author Choices

Topic 1: Body and Self-Image

- *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio
- *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* by Chris Crutcher
- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie
- *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* by Carolyn Mackler
- *Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson
- *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon Flake

Topic 2: Overcoming Obstacles

- *Buried Onions* by Gary Soto
- *Monster* by Walter Dean Meyers
- *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson
- *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* by Jacqueline Woodson
- *Push* by Sapphire
- *Crank* by Ellen Hopkins

Topic 3: Gender, Sex, and Sexuality

- *Winger* by Andrew Smith
- *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan
- *Luna* by Julie Anne Peters
- *Openly Straight* by Bill Konigsberg
- *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky
- *If You Could Be Mine* by Sarah Farizan

Topic 4: Dystopian Worlds

- *Unwind* by Neal Schusterman
- *Legend* by Marie Lu
- *The Uglies* by Scott Westerfeld
- *The Giver* by Lois Lowry
- *Feed* by M. T. Anderson
- *The House of the Scorpion* by Nancy Farmer

Topic 5: Graphic Novels

- *The Complete Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi
- *The Complete Maus* by Art Spiegelman
- *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang
- *Anya's Ghost* by Vera Brosgol
- *My Friend Dahmer* by Derf Backderf
- *Smile* by Raina Telgemeier

Topic 6: Author Selection

- Laurie Halse Anderson
- John Green
- Sarah Dessen
- Jacqueline Woodson
- Chris Crutcher
- Walter Dean Meyers
- Rainbow Rowell



BOOK IN REVIEW: A TEACHING GUIDE

Barbara A. **Ward**



Finding Hope and Resilience in Life's Bright Places:

Helping Adolescents Face Life's Challenges

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/>.

The theme for this issue of *The ALAN Review* revolves around what is often at the heart of many books written for young adults: the nature and challenges of adolescence/ts. It's intriguing to try to define these terms and to identify what it is that characterizes youth culture or makes adolescence what it is. Many readers of this journal are not that far removed from adolescence themselves, and the experience is still fresh in their minds. For those of us who are a little older, our age affords us the unique perspective of examining adolescence as it was depicted when we were young and now again in 2015. YAL as a genre was barely nascent when I was a teen reader, but I can certainly recall reading angst-filled classics such as *Wuthering Heights* (Brontë, 1847) and *Jane Eyre* (Brontë, 1847), the same weighty tomes that many adolescents read today, whether voluntarily or under pressure from their English teachers. But I can also recall gobbling up *The Pigman* (Zindel, 1968) and *Franny and Zooey* (Salinger, 1961), hungry to find books that would speak to me and describe my own life experiences as I continued my journey to adulthood.

Ah, adolescence, that most intriguing time in which many—but not all—childish things are put

away, and we look forward to the mingled pleasures that becoming an adult has to offer: independence, being on our own and making decisions for ourselves, starting and finishing high school and college, moving out, perhaps starting a family. Arguably, the adolescent years are concerned with a search for identity, finding ourselves, exploring possibilities outside our comfortable spaces, and coming of age in so many ways. It involves exploring our sexual and gender identities and sometimes taking risks.

Although my current acquaintances might disagree with the calendar, claiming that I act more like an adolescent than an adult in many ways, I still can remember those years of adolescence as clearly today as though they only occurred yesterday. I can remember well being caught up in the giddy excitement of my first crush only to have my heart broken when he didn't love me back. Rod Stewart's "The First Cut Is the Deepest" was the soundtrack for my heartbreak, and my poor parents had to listen to repeated plays of my 45 phonograph record, as well as my melancholic Joni Mitchell album "Blue," revolving endlessly on the turntable, with just the right ambience for depression provided by dim lighting, candles, and a firmly-shut bedroom door.

Each of us is a product of our experiences, whether first-hand or vicarious, and of our context. It's impossible to separate adolescents from the time period in which they grow up. It might be misty, unstudied, and unremarked history to many, but I grew up during the tumultuous Sixties. I became a teenager

during the Vietnam War and the protests against it, against the backdrop of several assassinations (JFK, RFK, MLK) and unprecedented violence in the streets; the times, they were a-changing. And I was changing with them. For a small-town Southern girl tiptoeing into adolescence, it was reading *The Bell Jar* (1971) by Sylvia Plath and the humorous yet meaningful novels of Kurt Vonnegut that influenced who I was. To know the books I chose to read was to become acquainted with a small part of me. After all, if adolescence mostly involves searching for one's identity and place in the sun, then books guided me along the way. It was through those books that I explored possible paths and identities and vicariously lived a completely different life than the one I led on my family's safe, sheltered farm.

As I was writing this column, I happened to go online to read comments made about some of the books I read during my adolescence, and one remark about *The Pigman* (1968) struck me as being most pertinent. The reviewer lauded the book's author for his ability to capture the way real teens speak and to focus his storyline not only on teens facing real problems, but also on their resourcefulness in coming up with solutions for those problems. Parents in those early books for teens tended to be absent, somewhat clueless, or ineffectual. As I reread the two books featured in this issue's column, I thought about the role of parents in them. To some extent, that absentee parent trend associated with early literature for teens seems to hold true even with books published five decades later. In *All the Bright Places* (Niven, 2015), home is not a bright place for the characters. Although Violet Markey has supportive parents, they treat her with kid gloves after the death of her sister, rarely even talking about Eleanor. Theodore Finch, Violet's romantic interest, spends tension-fraught weekends at the home of his father and stepmother, while at his own home, his mother is simply too busy, too preoccupied, and too unaware to see what's happening right in front of her. She barely knows Finch, just as many other parents of adolescents today may shake their heads in mystification as to whom or what their son or daughter has become. In *The Queen of Bright and Shiny Things* (Aguirre, 2015), Sage's parents are dead, her mother after a horrible house fire. But still, Sage has her Aunt Gabby, her father's half-sister, in her corner. Shane, her love interest, fends for himself in a trailer outside of town, his father having absented

himself to drive trucks and avoid thinking of his wife, Shane's mother, who died of cancer.

Adolescents in the twenty-first century deal with many of the same issues as past generations, and yet, they also cope with pressures that were unimaginable back then. Once unheard of, school shootings have become increasingly commonplace, and teens must deal with the suicides of classmates, mental illness, absentee parents, and bullying. While those of my generation may have faced some of these issues, their intensity and/or frequency seems to have increased as the decades have rolled by. Or maybe that's just what I want to believe, from my sheltered, detached, somewhat safe perspective.

Adolescents in the twenty-first century deal with many of the same issues as past generations, and yet, they also cope with pressures that were unimaginable back then.

About the Authors

Jennifer Niven, who has been writing since she was a child, is a writer making the move from adult fiction to young adult fiction. She has written eight books, and *All the Bright Places* (2015) is her debut novel for teens. Her first nonfiction book, *The Ice Master* (2000), was followed by her first novel, *Velva Jean Learns to Drive* (2009), and then by *Ada Blackjack* (2003) and *The Aqua Net Diaries* (2010), all titles for adults. She lives in Los Angeles.

Ann Aguirre, author of *The Queen of Bright and Shiny Things* (2015), is best known for her dystopian writing: her Razorland trilogy—*Enclave* (2011), *Outpost* (2012), *Horde* (2013)—and the paranormal Immortal Game trilogy—*Mortal Danger* (2014), *Public Enemies* (2015), and *Infinite Risk* (forthcoming in 2016). She grew up in a house near a cornfield, has a degree in English literature, and now lives in Mexico with her family. She worked as a clown, a clerk, and a voice actress before becoming a full-time writer, and she has written various types of genre fiction for adults and young adults.

Readers can learn more about these two authors at their websites: <http://www.annaguirre.com/> and <http://www.jenniferniven.com/>.

About the Books

All the Bright Places

Theodore Finch and Violet Markey are both marking time. He's counting the days when he actually feels alive and awake, while anticipating the darker ones that will end with him once again feeling comfortably numb. He wants to die and is preoccupied with death and possible ways to die, but at the same time, he is

He's counting the days when he actually feels alive and awake, while anticipating the darker ones that will end with him once again feeling comfortably numb.

searching for a reason to live. Violet, on the other hand, has a calendar on which she marks off the number of days until graduation. Until then, she sleepwalks through her days, desperate to leave Indiana far behind. For Violet, leaving home is not so much a journey of self-discovery as a chance to move on with her life and escape from the guilt she feels after the death of her older sister. But while she

waits, she's missing out on a lot of living.

The two characters meet when Violet comes close to stepping off the school bell tower; their classmates assume that she saved Finch when, in fact, the opposite is true. At first, the two teens seem to have nothing in common other than being drawn to death. But as they head off on road trips to examine the state's wonders for a school project, they become friends and then fall in love. Violet starts living again and seeing the joy around her, while Finch shows her the many bright places that are within driving distance. Despite the love that they share, he falls into deeper and lengthier depressions until he simply disappears. By the time Violet finds him, it's too late. She begins to question everything they've shared, while also realizing that he left her with wonderful memories and a new outlook on life.

The Queen of Shiny Things

Sage Czinski is like a lot of teen girls. While hiding her past and trying desperately to make herself indispensable to her aunt, she's also trying to avoid looking too closely at her own life and her own flaws. After all, if she's really busy and immersed in various causes, she

won't have time to reflect on her past or let people get too close to her. To her credit, she notices her classmates' pain and takes the time to place sticky notes on their lockers acknowledging their best attributes or something worth celebrating. When the book opens, she's also nurturing a secret crush on her best friend Ryan McKenna, but when she learns the truth about him and his involvement with an older woman, she pulls back. After all, he has used her to keep others from learning about his secret life, and that bothers her.

While she's trying to figure out how to fill the void left by Ryan's banishment, Shane Cavendish, a mysterious musician with a checkered past, transfers into her school. It turns out that he has plenty of secrets of his own, including a violent past and his current living situation. As Sage finds herself falling for him, she wonders if growing closer will necessitate sharing their secrets. Their relationship is complicated by Dylan, a bully who decides to make life difficult for Shane and for Lila, Dylan's ex-girlfriend. When Sage gets in the way, Dylan retaliates, but the author somehow still makes him a sympathetic character by revealing his relationship with his mother and what others say about her.

About the Covers

Many teachers tell students not to judge a book by its cover, and while there is some wisdom in that old adage, I also find it insightful to examine book covers and allow readers to make guesses about the books' topics before opening them. With images of sticky notes included on their covers, these two books stand out. *All the Bright Places*, with its small versions of sticky notes, uses soft pastels—yellows, blues, lilacs—and one word on each sticky note to reveal the book's title, then additional sticky notes filled with words and symbols to perfectly depict the relationship covered in the book and encapsulate its plot artistically. The cover of *The Queen of Bright and Shiny Things* features 10 snapshots of a couple tucked close together and riding a bicycle. The black-and-white images frame three bright pink, bright lilac, and bright blue sticky notes that are almost actual size. Both book titles appear on the sticky notes, one neatly organized in a series of rows or arrays and the other almost haphazardly placed on the page. It's hard to resist trying to lift them up in order to see if there are messages hidden underneath.

Using the Books in the Classroom

Pre-reading Activities

- Sticky notes play important roles in both books. Check out this website for interesting ways to use these little slips of paper: http://www.Post-it.com/wps/portal/3M/en_US/PostItNA/Home/. The site includes curriculum and study tips as well as projects, including sticky note sculpture and origami. Read an article about how these ubiquitous but helpful papers came into existence in 1974 and their interesting inventors, Arthur Fry and Spencer Silver, at The Great Idea Finder: <http://www.ideafinder.com/history/inventions/postit.htm>. Also check out this CNN article on the “Hallelujah moment” behind the invention of the sticky note at <http://www.cnn.com/2013/04/04/tech/Post-it-note-history/index.html>.
- As the characters in both novels realize, each day is filled with both joys and challenges. Perhaps survival is a matter of perspective on each of those. To remind yourself of what brings joy to your heart, make a daily gratitude list that includes a minimum of five individuals, places, or items for which you are grateful. Share your list with a friend or family member. Maybe even a pet!
- Words are important to the protagonists in both books. In *All the Bright Places*, Finch chooses to express his fondness for good words that make the world a brighter place by recording them on sticky notes, while in *The Queen of Bright and Shiny Things*, Sage works hard to find something noteworthy about those around her in high school. Take five sticky notes and write a descriptive word that best describes you, such as “vivacious,” “friendly,” “passionate,” “patient.” Put the sticky notes in a prominent place, perhaps on your bathroom or bedroom mirror, as a reminder of your best qualities.
- You and your classmates can share and gather compliments through this creative and affirmative activity. First create a simple origami box by following the instructions at <http://www.origami-instructions.com/origami-box.html>. The box requires one square sheet of paper; if you also want to fashion a lid, you will need two sheets of paper. After creating your box (and possibly a

lid), tear several strips of paper so that you have enough strips to write down three compliments for each of your classmates. Record one compliment per strip. The compliments can be anonymous, or you can include your name on the strip. It’s up to you. Think hard about each of your classmates and give each of them three written compliments to be stored in the origami take-out compliment box. Your teacher should make sure that no one looks at the compliments until class is dismissed. If you don’t think you received the kinds of compliments that you would like to receive, then write your own compliments for yourself and stash them in your box. When you’re feeling discouraged, open up your treasure box and reread the compliments.

Interdisciplinary Connections

- At the behest of a teacher who assigns a unique school project, Finch and Violet (from *All the Bright Places*) visit all sorts of bright places in Indiana where they live. Find a map online, download one on your Smartphone, or use a paper map of Indiana, and then identify and plot the places they visit. Are these made-up spots or actual destinations? Create a brochure enticing savvy teen tourists to visit Indiana and the places Finch and Violet ventured during the book.
- What are the bright places in your own life or your own community? After revisiting them in some way—through a road trip or a stroll down memory lane or rereading your own diary or journal—design a detailed map that pays tribute to those places. Be sure to use symbols, words, and dates that are meaningful for you.
- In *The Queen of Bright and Shiny Things*, Sage becomes deeply involved in a community garden project with a small group of classmates. Before they can plant a garden, though, they must clean the area and remove all the debris and junk that has been left there. Being able to make such a tangible difference in their community is empowering for these teens. Your community or school may have such a garden. Do some investigating and take photos of the garden. If there is no school or community garden near you, scope out some areas that might be ripe for planting . . . and picking, once your fruits and veggies are growing.

Group Discussion Questions

- The characters in both books hold on to secrets. Why is that the case? What makes us want to keep our secrets safe from others? How do we know when it's safe to share those secrets or reveal who we really are? What makes secrets so damaging?
- Consider the behavior of the parents in both of the books, and then imagine how very different each book might have been if the parents of Finch, for instance, had been switched with Sage's guardian and vice versa. Imagine that your parents are part of either one of the family dynamics depicted in these books. With which parenting style do you think they would be most comfortable? Why? How do you envision yourself in the future if you decide to be a parent? What mistakes and what good decisions did you identify on the part of the parents in both books? Assume you are a parent in either book and identify some of the words and actions you might handle differently and explain why.
- Both books contain different examples of bullying—some from classmates, some from teachers, and even sometimes, sadly, from parents. Although it's impossible to quantify, which type of bullying in either book did you regard as most damaging? Why? If you were one of these characters, what would you want to say in a letter, a tweet, a text message, or a dramatic monologue? Why? Would it do any good?
- Like many teen readers, I enjoy a good romance. However, I don't think that romance or a romantic relationship has to be the thing that saves us from the perils of the wide world or from our own demons. Yet both books feature characters that seem to save one another—at least for a short time. Is there any danger in encouraging teen readers to read books like this that seem to say, in part, that two is better than one or that we need someone else to help us find our way? Can we not be the heroes of our own stories?
- Both Finch in *All the Bright Places* and Sage in *The Queen of Bright and Shiny Things* are drawn in many respects to what is the best and brightest in the world around them. Think for a little while about your own world, and then identify the things that you would share with someone who just moved into your community or state. What are the “bright places” or “bright and shiny things” in your surroundings? What makes them so appealing?
- Physical intimacy requires a certain amount of trust, and yet both couples, Sage and Shane in *The Queen of Bright and Shiny Things* and Violet and Finch in *All the Bright Places*, maintain their secrets even after becoming physically intimate. Why do you think that is so? Are there parts of each of us or places hidden deep within our psyche that are far more precious to us than the pleasure we give and receive from a physical relationship? How can this be so?
- All of the main characters in both books have experienced some sort of loss. Discuss the ways each character copes with the losses in his/her life. Consider also how Sage stuffs away her feelings and her anger for fear that she will completely lose control or cause her aunt to send her away. Think about how Violet's parents never talk about Eleanor, making it almost seem as though she never existed. What problems do you see with these coping mechanisms? What advantages do you see with them? How do you cope with loss? How do those around you cope with loss? How do people in cultures other than your own cope with loss?
- In *The Queen of Bright and Shiny Things*, Lila, who becomes a close friend to Sage, must deal with a great deal of gossip about her alleged sexual promiscuity. Sadly, the rumors can be traced back to her boyfriend, Dylan Smith. Dylan, in turn, has to deal with the rumors that fly through the school about his mother's attractiveness and her sexuality. Consider briefly the terms that are used when describing a male who is sexually active and a female who is sexually active. It often seems that there is a double standard at work here, since males are often described as studs, while females might be called sluts. Why do you suppose that is? What can we do about it? Does popular culture have any impact on how we regard the sexual behavior of males and females? How about in your high school? How much slut-shaming occurs within your high school's walls? What are you doing about it? Are you stopping it, passing it on, adding to it, or questioning it? From an even broader perspective, how is it possible to confront gossip?
- When we are young, adults often tell us that “Sticks and stones may break your bones, but

words can never hurt you.” While words can inflict no physical damage, they do cut deeply and hurt us. What do you think prompted Decca, Finch’s sister, to be so determined to remove all the unpleasant words from her books? Why is he so struck by that activity that he continues working on her project long after she’s finished with it? What words do you find the most hurtful in your daily life?

- Several characters in both books want to protect others from being hurt. Is it possible to ensure someone’s safety, surround him/her with good, and prevent those we love from the bad? Why do you think as you do?

Wonderful Words Worth Noting

With the words they choose and the way they place those words, good writers help readers know their characters. Find a partner and discuss the quotations below. Be sure to explain what each passage reveals about the character and/or how the quote makes you feel. What makes the passage particularly memorable? Or, if you don’t like the lines, why don’t they appeal to you? Do they seem inauthentic?

FROM *ALL THE BRIGHT PLACES*

“I close my eyes, enjoying the way everything spins. Maybe this time I’ll do it—let the air carry me away. It will be like floating in a pool, drifting off until there’s nothing.” (p. 3)

“Like Ryan, my parents are perfect. They are strong and brave and caring, and even though I know they must cry and get angry and maybe even throw things when they’re alone, they rarely show it to me.” (p. 51)

“I love the world that is my room. It’s nicer in here than out there, because in here I’m whatever I want to be.” (p. 52)

“I don’t say anything because I used to love words. I loved them and was good at arranging them. Because of this, I felt protective of all the best ones. But now all of them, good and bad, frustrate me.” (p. 92)

“He smiles out at the ugly trees and the ugly farmland and the ugly kids as if he can see Oz. As if he really, truly sees the beauty that’s there.” (p. 97)

“There’s no rush of having survived, only emptiness, and lungs that need air, and wet hair sticking to my face.” (p. 107)

“I know life well enough to know you can’t count on things staying around or standing still, no matter how much you want them to. You can’t stop people from dying. You can’t stop them from going away. You can’t stop yourself from

going away either.” (pp. 139–140)

“Better to keep the unhappy, mad, bad, unpleasant words separate, where you can watch them and make sure they don’t surprise you when you’re not expecting them.” (p. 166)

“What if life could be this way? Only the happy parts, none of the terrible, not even the mildly unpleasant. What if we could just cut out the bad and keep the good? This is what I want to do with Violet—give her only the good, keep away the bad, so that good is all we ever have around us.” (p. 168)

“My light is off and my eyes are closed when I realize that for the first time I’ve forgotten to cross off the day on my calendar.” (p. 191)

“He opens the door to his closet, and it actually looks pretty cool. He’s made a cave for himself, complete with guitar and computer and notebooks of staff paper, along with pens and Post-its. My picture is tacked to the blue wall along with a license plate.” (p. 291)

“It’s not just that the room is bare—it’s that there’s a strange, dead stillness to the air, as if the room is an empty shell left behind by an animal.” (p. 311)

“The thing I realize is that it’s not what you take, it’s what you leave.” (p. 376)

FROM *THE QUEEN OF BRIGHT AND SHINY THINGS*

“I walk on, brightening my smile thorough sheer determination. I’ve heard if you pretend long enough—or maybe wish hard enough—faking normal becomes real. I’m counting on that.” (p. 2)

You can lie to yourself about all kinds of things. Until you can’t, anymore. Until reality pounds a hole through your fantasy castle and the reality check must be cashed.” (p. 9)

“This is a Tuesday. Nothing earth shattering ever happens on a Tuesday. It doesn’t even have a catchy nickname, unlike Wednesday, aka Hump Day.” (p. 60)

“But maybe it’s only horrible to be gay in this town if you’re a guy. Two girls together, on the other hand, might be considered hot. I hate that double standard so *much*.” (p. 66)

“Like me, he needs to get out of here; he’s running toward something bigger and brighter.” (p. 75)

“It’s kind of revelational to realize that graduation doesn’t also mean receiving all the answers. This is also depressing. I imagine being fifty-eight years old, still with no idea what the heck is going on.” (p. 116)

“I don’t know if I’m excited that he wants to know me or terrified about how he’ll feel once he does.” (p. 122)

“I’m so not enough. I can’t be. I smile, and I act happy, and I pretend. I’m the queen of bright and shiny things,

eternally looking for the positive and seeking a silver lining in the dark.” (p. 169)

“I wish I could say the time races like white-water rapids, but it’s more like honey in cold weather. But the clock hands can’t actually run backward, so eventually, it’s Wednesday afternoon.” (p. 222)

“Once people think you sleep around, it doesn’t much matter if you do or not.” (p. 245)

“When I get to my locker after school, I stop, staring at it in astonishment. The entire surface is covered in sticky notes. They’re lined up neatly in a rainbow of hues and ink colors, different handwritings that tell me this show of support comes from a vast array of people. I read them with dawning wonder, and the ice cracks a fraction in my heart.” (p. 280)

Post-reading Activities

- Conduct a thorough Internet search to identify possible sources of help for the characters in both books. *All the Bright Places* includes several suggested websites for information about suicide, bullying, and abuse. Start with those websites, read them carefully, and then write a brief review of each one telling how useful you consider them to be. Then, expand your search and find even more online resources. Finally, explore your own community, and find out what help is available for teens in crisis. Create a brochure describing these resources so that your classmates and other teens have places to turn. If there are no resources in your school or community, band together with your friends and write a letter or petition requesting that resources be made available.
- Now that you have completed both books, consider the titles chosen for the books. Why do you think the titles work or don’t work? If you were the books’ publishers, what are some other possible titles you might suggest?
- Design another cover for each of the books, highlighting what you consider to be their most important themes. Alternatively, create a 30-second book trailer or teaser for each book urging your classmates to read it. Be sure not to give away how the story turns out, since your teacher may decide to share these with his/her class next year.
- Choose one of the books (or use both if you prefer), and then identify pivotal moments or points in the book. After carefully considering those important moments, choose five to depict by creating a collage from magazine photos, your original artwork, and text from the book or from letters cut from magazine ads. Be prepared to share your work with your classmates.
- Return to the books and note how each one is organized. *The Queen of Bright and Shiny Things*, for instance, relies on a simple chapter organization, starting with chapter one and concluding with chapter thirty-three, with first-person narration. Except for brief passages in which the main character, Sage, ruminates on her past, everything occurs in present time. Readers never learn the perspectives of the other characters about how they regard the action or even the main character. *All the Bright Places* uses a different narrative technique, since the story alternates between Finch and Violet and includes a countdown. Rewrite one of the passages from either book from the point of view of another character and then share with a classmate or your teacher what you noticed as you reread and reworked these passages.
- In *All the Bright Places*, Violet and her sister maintained a blog before her sister died; Violet at first shuts it down, but she starts another one eventually. Imagine that you are Finch in the same book, and you are maintaining a blog. Create it and put it online. What does it reveal about you? Which version of Finch are you choosing to share with the world? Why? What if Sage and Lila decided to pour their energies into a blog? What might it include? Create a blog for these two characters from *The Queen of Bright and Shiny Things* and post it.
- Found poems can provide a creative way to respond artistically to texts since they rely on rereading and then rearranging existing pieces of text. Because the choice of the words and phrases and their order are determined by the found poem’s creator, the resulting product is quite personal and somewhat revealing. After reading more about this poetic form at the Academy of American Poets website (<http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/poetic-form-found-poem>), try your hand at creating a found poem from either one of the books. Using sticky notes is strongly suggested so that you can capture the flavor of the book in your poetic creation.
- One of my favorite scenes in *The Queen of Bright*

and *Shiny Things* occurs when Cassie, Ryan's secret older girlfriend, visits Sage at the beauty parlor. That took a lot of courage. Imagine that you are Cassie trying to work up the nerve to confront Sage and get to know her. What would you write in your journal to give yourself courage to do so? What if Sage and Cassie hadn't been open to getting to know one another? Rewrite the scene to make it turn out differently. You might even have Ryan arriving on the scene just as Cassie reveals who she is to Sage.

- One of my favorite scenes in *All the Bright Places* occurs when Finch finds his little sister Decca cutting out all of the mean and unpleasant words from her books. Create your own poster filled with images and words that bring you joy and one with words and images that hurt.
- Books often omit certain scenes, leaving the specific details of what might have happened to the imagination of readers. Write a dramatic monologue or dialogue depicting one omitted scene from either book. For instance, you might craft a monologue for Sage after she has set fire to the house where her mother was living. Or you might write a dialogue between Violet and Ryan in which she spells out all the reasons he has to live. The possibilities are almost limitless, and the length or intensity of the scene is up to you. After you've composed your scene, perform it before your classmates, or ask a classmate to perform it with you.

These Remind Me of You

Both of the books featured in this column highlight characters dealing with very real problems—often ones beyond their ability to control, including mental illness, depression, abuse, trauma, bullying, slut-shaming, and fitting in. Each of the books below offers additional perspectives on these particular issues. Both Finch and Violet in *All the Bright Places* and Sage and Shane in *The Queen of Bright and Shiny Things* have secrets they keep from each other and their friends, even while growing closer together. The characters in the books suggested below deal with their challenging issues in many different ways; some of them are extremely self-destructive, but others choose healthier paths, channeling their pain into art, drama, and music:

- Camden, S. (2015). *It's about love*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Children's Books.
- Nijkamp, M. (2016). *This is where it ends*. Chicago, IL: Sourcebooks Fire.
- Oseman, A. (2015). *Solitaire*. New York, NY: HarperTeen.
- Portes, A. (2014). *Anatomy of a misfit*. New York, NY: Harper Children's.
- Rodriguez, C. L. (2015). *When reason breaks*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.
- Rowell, R. (2013). *Eleanor & Park*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin.

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- Aguirre, A. (2016). *Infinite risk*. New York, NY: Feiwel and Friends.
- Brontë, C. (1847). *Jane Eyre*. London, UK: Smith, Elder & Company.
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- Niven, J. (2003). *Ada Blackjack: A true story of survival in the Arctic*. New York, NY: Hachette Books.
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- Niven, J. (2015). *All the bright places*. New York, NY: Random House/Alfred A. Knopf Books for Young Readers.
- Plath, Sylvia. (1971). *The bell jar*. New York, NY: Bantam.
- Salinger, J. D. (1961). *Franny and Zooey*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.
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Sandra Schamroth Abrams



Hannah R. Gerber

LAYERED LITERACIES

Erica Holan **Lucci**
with
Sandra Schamroth **Abrams**
and Hannah R. **Gerber**



Layered Perspectives of Adolescent Literacies

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/>.

In this column, we build upon the understanding that today’s learners engage in a layering of literacies as they move among and across online and offline experiences (Abrams, 2015). Researcher and educator Erica Holan Lucci serves as a contributor to this piece and highlights how the layered perspectives of videogames in particular can provide insight into adolescents’ literate practices. Through her experiences as a teacher and a gamer—a dual identity that has informed her understanding of the spaces, practices, and literacies inherent in most adolescent gamers’ lives—Lucci advances understandings of young adult literature and pedagogy by focusing on world building in the popular videogame *Minecraft* as a tool for helping students deepen their understandings of Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* series (2011–2013).

In what follows, Lucci presents “Teacher-Gamers and Mining a Literary Craft,” which not only provides a layered perspective of gaming, but also highlights how videogames can serve as valuable texts that support interpersonal connections and critical meaning making among students. Lucci homes in on the importance of understanding adolescents’ layered literacies and offers examples of how teacher-gamers embrace flexibility and creativity when they pair videogames and young adult literature to support agentive and meaningful learning.

Teacher-Gamers and Mining a Literary Craft

Erica Holan Lucci

What advantages do videogames have as pedagogical tools? How do they connect with adolescent students in particular? My husband recently posed these questions to me during a discussion of this article’s theme, and I began to think about how I should respond:

- from a teacher’s perspective;
- from a gamer’s perspective;
- from a researcher’s perspective;
- from a teacher-gamer’s perspective (Holan, 2013; Lucci, 2015a, 2015b)?

Ultimately, I decided that all four perspectives are relevant and worth considering in light of how popular young adult texts, which include videogames, can lead to critical discussions both in and out of the classroom. Videogames such as *Minecraft*, which has over 100 million subscribers (Makuch, 2014), are complex and multilayered texts; they require players to engage with and interpret a wide array of information, internal and external, online and offline, all at once. Originally created for computer use and since expanding to various other platforms, including Xbox and mobile formats, *Minecraft* is a “sandbox” game, and, as such, can be explored by roaming the game universe freely at the player’s will.

In *Minecraft*, users have the option of playing in five modes: “Survival,” “Creative,” “Adventure,” “Hardcore,” and “Spectator,” with each supporting different forms of interaction. For the purposes of

the assignment discussed within this article, Creative Mode would be the ideal format for “world building.” Creative Mode, like most of the other modes, enables players to construct simulated objects without the constraints that would normally interfere with their freedom, such as monster attacks (aggressive attacks by “evil” creatures, such as “cave spiders” or “creepers,” that occur during the “night” hours of the game) or limited access to virtual building materials (given that players must collect materials by scavenging the virtual landscape of the game—some items are available more frequently than others). Additionally, *Minecraft* has an “.EDU” version, which is worth exploring for its discounted student membership and server subscription that enable all students to belong to a class’s dedicated *Minecraft* world. That said, it is not necessary to use the .EDU version to complete the assignments discussed in this article. More information regarding the various forms of *Minecraft* play can be found at: <http://minecraft.gamepedia.com/Gameplay>.

As an educator, I see extraordinary opportunities for learning through the use of videogames and game design in a classroom setting. Though some have been skeptical of videogames in the classroom (cf. Rice, 2007), others have acknowledged the value of videogames as pedagogical tools (Abrams & Russo, 2015; Gerber & Price, 2013; Kenny & McDaniel, 2009; Schrader, Zheng, & Young, 2006; Squire, 2011). Systems thinking (e.g., engineering), 21st century skills, digital literacies, social media savvy, and collaboration skills are just some of the benefits that students can develop through game-based pedagogy (De Aguilera & Méndiz, 2003; Gallagher & Prestwich, 2013; Gee, 2013; Squire, 2007; Squire & Barab, 2004). Moreover, by involving important literacy practices that typically are relatable to teens, videogaming can inspire critical discourse among adolescents, teachers, and scholars.

As a gamer, I realize that the videogame medium has helped me connect with my middle school students because of our shared interest (cf. Black, 2006). I can anticipate many of the assumptions and strategies that go into game play in general. For instance, when playing *Minecraft*, I know what it means to figure out if there is a programming error (also known as a glitch) or if I am simply not understanding what to do (and I understand such frustration). I also understand the copious time and effort necessary to engage

in related game-based literacy practices, such as reading through pages of forum chat, responding to people who comment in the forums, avoiding people who try to create discord with inflammatory remarks (also known as trolls), contributing my own posts, and even creating entries into game wikis (see Fig. 1 for an example of the *Minecraft* wiki). Being a gamer is hard work and, because I value, recognize, and share similar experiences as my gamer-students, I find that I have yet another way to support them as learners; I am able to be part of *and* draw upon an effective form of interest-based learning (cf. Ito et al., 2009).

As a researcher, I have read an extensive body of literature on the topic of videogames and learning, and I focus on the integration of videogame design into the traditional classroom curriculum. I bring a unique perspective to the relationship between literature and adolescence because I consider how a teacher’s self-identification as a gamer can affect his or her pedagogy (Holan, 2013; Lucci, 2015a, 2015b).

As a teacher-gamer, I see videogaming as a valid literacy practice (Squire, 2008) that can help me connect with my students in relevant and innovative ways. And I am not the only one. Other teacher-gamers, such as Frank (all names are pseudonyms by request), who teaches high school Latin, also use videogames to help students develop their understanding of academic material. More specifically, Frank has adapted a standard assignment—that of crafting model Roman houses—by giving students the option to do so digitally using videogames, such as the world-building game *Minecraft* (discussed further below) and the life simulation game *The Sims*. His students were immediately engaged when introduced to this possibility and began to discuss approaches to the project with great enthusiasm. These same students ended up devoting many hours to making their models as painstakingly detailed as possible, and the results were impressive. Because Frank was able to connect with his students as gamers, he could channel their passion and extend learning—and pedagogy—beyond traditional realms. Although not the focus of the assignment, the role of adolescents in the Roman household became a topic of conversation when Frank’s students considered how their Roman counterparts might have experienced life and how this compared to their own lived experiences.

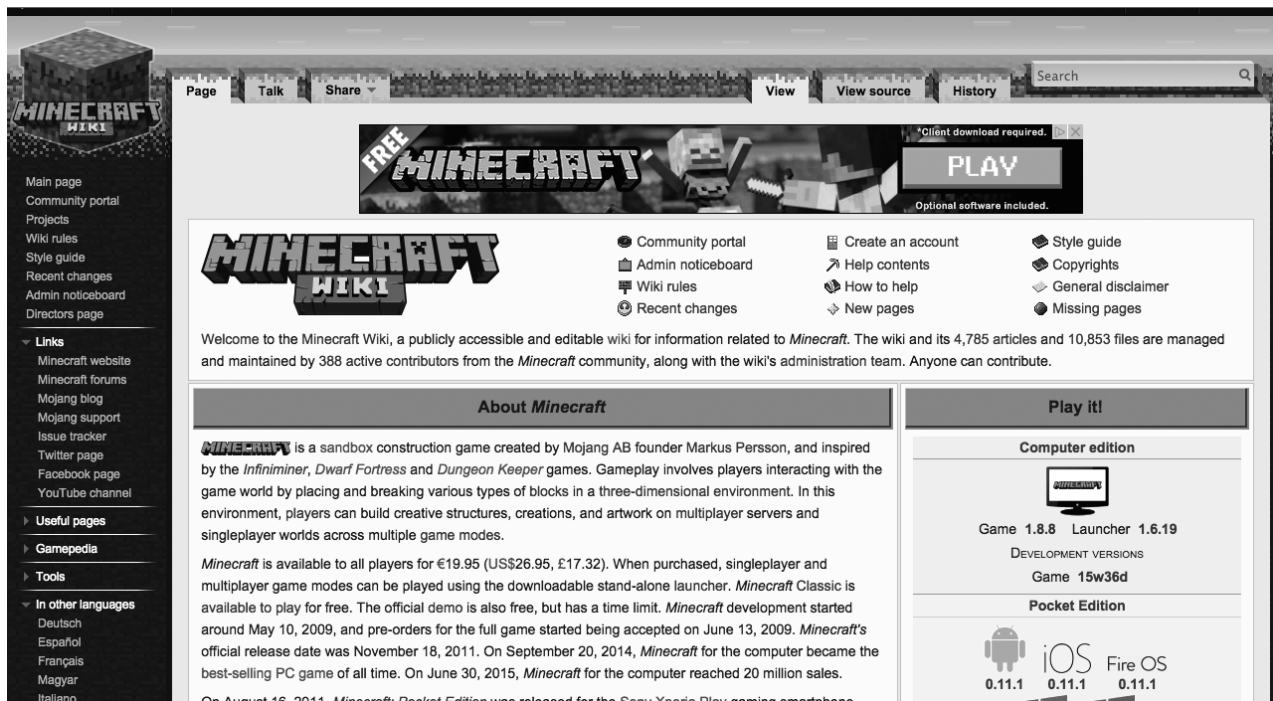


Figure 1. Entry for *Minecraft* on the official Minecraft wiki (Retrieved 19 August, 2015, from <http://minecraft.gamepedia.com/Minecraft>.)

Mining a Literary Craft: Using *Minecraft* to Enhance Understandings of Young Adult Literature

Layering Student Literacies

Even without requiring videogame use or game design in class, important connections can be forged through assignments that layer students' literacies (Abrams, 2015). For example, one seventh-grade teacher-gamer, Lena, encouraged those of her students who are avid fans of *Minecraft* to collaboratively use the game to recreate scenes from the texts they read for class. Lena's literary project builds upon interest-based learning and enables her students to showcase their skills within *Minecraft* while fulfilling the requirements of the assigned task. More specifically, the students participated in the "traditional" literate activity of reading the text, and they formed pairs to work together, collaboratively creating a simulated environment from the narrative and adding details specific to the task Lena had assigned.

In addition to world building, the students engaged in higher-order thinking, including applica-

tion, synthesis, and evaluation. Student-generated narrations not only revealed the methods by which they constructed the worlds, but also supported self-evaluation and evidence-based learning; that is, students needed to provide a rationale for their work by explaining how and why they represented their ideas as they did. The students presented their projects using screencasts, a method of capturing video footage of their constructed worlds, accompanied by student-narrated audio recordings that explained the rationale for each design choice they made. Students finally uploaded their screencasts to YouTube in order to share their work across various digital platforms, furthering their knowledge of social media. In other words, Lena supported a sophisticated layering of literacies over the course of the project, which led to dynamic, multilayered learning.

Frank and Lena are but two examples of educators who call upon videogames to support students' understanding of young adult literature and to assess the depth of students' knowledge of a text. In what follows, I show another approach that uses the Divergent trilogy as central texts; here, I build upon the

extant examples and explain how students can use landscaping (world building) to create characters and/or places or show alternative settings and plots for the book. I also address additional options, such as including cinema and fan fiction, to inspire whole-class participation. To make this accessible to teachers who aren't gamers, I have provided a how-to link and a sidebar box about how teachers can go about learning the logistics of *Minecraft*.

Divergent Themes and World Building

Taking advantage of students' interest in the popular Divergent trilogy (2011–2013) by Veronica Roth, teachers can use *Minecraft* world building as an opportunity for students to literally and figuratively expand upon the themes discussed within the text. The Divergent trilogy, like other popular young adult texts such as *The Hunger Games* trilogy (Collins, 2008–2010), is set in a dystopian world. The (dis)similarities to our own world encourage students to imaginatively recreate the text, especially in a digital context (cf. Curwood & Fink, 2013). In a similar vein to Curwood and Fink's research, this type of activity (i.e., world building) “. . . shows how technology can facilitate young people's active participation in online spaces and promote their development of 21st century literacy skills” (p. 417). In fact, even a quick Google search will reveal dozens of adolescent-created *Minecraft* environments based on the Divergent series, some of which are addressed below.

The Divergent trilogy is particularly appropriate for a *Minecraft* world-building activity because its characters are categorized into five factions that define their social status and are based on their personality traits:

- Abnegation—the selfless
- Dauntless—the brave
- Erudite—the intelligent
- Amity—the peaceful
- Candor—the honest

These five factions exist to keep all members of society in line and deprive them of free will, which would otherwise endanger the safety of the population. There are a number of richly realized themes within the trilogy, such as identity, fear, society and class, family, friendship, and competition. An in-class discussion of the factions outlined above might support students' explorations of their own personality traits and questions about stereotyping and social status.

How To Get Started

The link <https://minecraft.net/game/howtoplay> takes you to Minecraft.net, a website created for the purposes of introducing people to the game. The site includes descriptions and videos to help you get started on your *Minecraft* journey. I recommend highly that, when starting out with this game, you find someone (a gamer, colleague, significant other, a student) who has already played and can help you if you get stuck.

Using *Minecraft* to World Build

Though teachers can create their own activities, they also can build upon extant activities, such as Gabrielle Thompson's "Creative Prompt 1" (available at <http://gthompsonportfolio.weebly.com/divergent-unit.html>), that encourage students to apply their understandings beyond the text. Thompson requires her students to write an essay envisioning their *own* faction, which "can be based on anything from a way of thinking, to the way people look, ethnicities, gender, creativity, favorite hobby, etc." Her prompt inspires higher-order thinking, as guiding questions help students to describe their faction in great detail, develop a faction manifesto, and explain how the faction has a personal connection. The final component of this assignment is especially relevant to a *Minecraft* context: Thompson requires her students to draw a picture of their faction.

The image she asks students to draw can be taken a step further through the use of *Minecraft*. More specifically, students can collaborate in an online space accessible only to them (known as a "private server") and turn what otherwise would be a two-dimensional drawing of their faction into an intricate three-dimensional virtual world in which members of their faction can "live." For example, they might design, build, and furnish headquarters for their chosen faction. These can be extremely complex, as seen in the screenshot in Figure 2, which depicts fan-made versions of the headquarters of the five factions from the books. Within these headquarters, students can develop a "library" of documents—which they themselves write—containing the faction's manifesto, one of the requirements of Thompson's lesson plan, among others.



Figure 2. Screenshot from the *Minecraft* “DivergentMC” server (Retrieved from <http://www.planetminecraft.com/forums/divergentmc-based-off-divergent-series-t200119.html>.)

Minecraft users might also create mods (modifications of the original game) that enable students to upload images from their computers for display in their virtual headquarters. These images could include student-generated “posters” depicting their faction’s logo, propaganda, and the like. In *Minecraft*, students can affix these posters to almost any space or surface, from a building to a wall. (The YouTube video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uluwx3TegNs> might serve as inspiration.) Of course, such posters don’t have to be created on the computer; students who are more comfortable with traditional media can draw posters and then use a digital camera to capture and upload the image to the *Minecraft* world. Further, teachers can support such student-driven meaning making by encouraging student modding (i.e., modification making) to the space (and perhaps to the assignment). In doing so, students take ownership of their learning, and teachers embrace students’ agentive creations that stem from the layering of their literacies; because students have the freedom to draw upon their digital and non-digital experiences, they can develop personally relevant, reimagined spaces.

When not in *Minecraft*, students can continue to layer their understandings of the Divergent trilogy by drawing upon other multimodal activities. Another of Gabrielle Thompson’s prompts (“Creative Prompt 2”), in which students representing each of the five factions deliver a group presentation about their faction, includes options for visual aids. Expanding upon Thompson’s suggestions for students to use a PowerPoint presentation or collage of pictures, educators could also prompt students or groups of students to present to the class a “screencast” of the world they have created in *Minecraft*. A screencast is used during students’ presentations about their projects to offer their audience a “walk-through” of their game-space using screencasting software. Screencasting in this way would serve as another means of fostering students’ 21st century skill building; at the least, they would gain experience in using screencast software, but they might also edit and upload videos to YouTube or Vimeo, or even share the videos via various social media forums, such as a class Twitter account. In addition to 21st century skill building, the creation of screencasts fosters students’ critical thinking

and decision making: students carefully select their screencasts, highlight specific elements, and purposefully use video and narration to develop an argument. Further, research has suggested that students embrace the writing process more enthusiastically when they edit videos, while digital storytelling helps students to hone traditional literacy skills (Skinner & Hagood, 2008).

Looking to the Future: Teacher-Gamers, Layered Literacies, and Young Adult Texts

Students can develop collaborative, creative, and critical thinking skills by using *Minecraft* and drawing on their knowledge of Web 2.0 tools to deepen understandings of young adult literature. In reconstructing a particular space (e.g., creating the futuristic setting of Chicago from the *Divergent* series) or developing a structure entirely of their own design (such as additional factions beyond the five described in the novels), students need to consider the tools and resources available to them within the game; as such, they need to critically evaluate how these resources may support or limit their initial architectural blueprints for the landscapes they intend to create. Assistance from fellow classmates may not only help to uncover alternative routes they can take to generate their faction superstructures, but also can foster collaborative creation among students. Students may discover together, for example, how the resources available in *Minecraft* can be used to create habitats (e.g., the use of cobblestone versus wood to build shelter).

These world-building activities honor the layering of students' out-of-school literacy practices, which include their gaming practices and their identities as gamers, learners, and adolescents. Such autonomous educational experiences typically have been acceptable beyond school hours or during students' down time. However, the layering of literacies in the classroom can help students develop a critical and personal understanding of the text because they recreated it in the *Minecraft* world.

As a teacher-gamer, I am drawn to the innovative use of *Minecraft* to make the *Divergent* trilogy come alive. I appreciate the unique connections between teacher and student that such assignments can promote. Setting the stage for schema building, teachers

can develop well-crafted questions asking students to reflect on their personal interpretations of the text. As the story progresses and themes emerge, specific objects discussed throughout the text symbolize the bevy of emotions the characters feel but cannot always express, or they represent the characters' stances on certain issues (e.g., the factions they are born into). Further, a multilayered, game-based assignment has the ability to bring together the interests of both teacher(-gamer) and student on school grounds in an educational context.

Conclusion

Although most language arts classrooms focus on the texts themselves, and students' comprehension of the texts is usually assessed through the creation of an essay, book report, or examination, teachers can build upon the above ideas to foster the growth and development of their students' 21st century skills through innovative approaches to assessment. These approaches need not be limited to the *Divergent* series and can be applied to practically any YA text.

Teachers can take more commonly known creative assignments, like the creation of book trailers (see Davila, 2010) or fanfiction (see Mathew & Adams, 2009), and have students work together to create a virtual platform in *Minecraft* for all of the works they've produced. The virtual buildings described above might house libraries containing digital versions of fanfiction or theaters projecting video clips of book trailers or reviews. In other words, students can use their *Minecraft* worlds to integrate and display a wide variety of assignments pertaining to all kinds of young adult literature.

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Because students have the freedom to draw upon their digital and non-digital experiences, they can develop personally relevant, reimagined spaces.

pedagogies (e.g., through the use of video games, geocaching/ geolocation), project- and game-based learning, gamification, multimodal approaches to instruction, teaching with technology, and online education.

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James Blasingame

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RIGHT TO READ

Tracey **Flores**
and Meg **Medina**
with
E. Sybil **Durand** and
James **Blasingame**



Embracing the Difficult Truths of Adolescence through Young Adult Literature

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/>.

In the call for submissions for this issue of *The ALAN Review*, the editors explain that “how we conceive of adolescence influences our perception of adolescents.” With respect to this column, we wondered what censorship reveals about censors’ perceptions of young people. It seems to us that when adults block adolescents’ access to books that address the concerns and possible difficult realities young people face, they suggest that adolescents are incapable of handling these challenging situations. Such a stance aims to cover and largely silence the ugly truths of adolescence—that young people are not always innocent and that some young people are the victims (and perpetrators) of violence, including bullying and verbal, physical, and sexual assault. Ultimately, censoring books that represent these issues in realistic and accessible ways works to undermine the lived experiences of so many adolescents readers.

If censors hold a narrow perception of adolescents, the reverse is also true. As an organization, ALAN is evidence of the authors, librarians, and educators who recognize that many young people face challenging situations and who believe that, as a whole, adolescents are fully capable of understanding and addressing these issues. These adults honor youth cultures by creating discursive and literary spaces

where young people can engage with social issues in safe ways. For this column, we asked two youth advocates to share their thoughts about youth culture, censorship, and young people’s right to read. Tracey Flores, the director of Arizona State University’s (ASU) youth literacy event, “Día de los Niños, Día de los Libros,” discusses her approach to creating a space that honors young people and their cultures, languages, and literacies. Meg Medina, the author of *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* (2013) and a keynote speaker at Día, shares her experience with censorship and the importance of writing and providing access to books that embrace the difficult truths of adolescence.

(Re)mediating Youth Spaces through Literature

In May of 2015, ASU hosted its fifth annual “Día de los Niños, Día de los Libros.” This event, organized by Tracey Flores and Jim Blasingame, features authors, poets, and scholars who write about issues relevant to young people. In 2015, over 600 middle and high school students attended Día. They listened to keynote speakers such as poet Alberto Ríos and slam poet Myrlyn Hepworth, as well as young adult literature authors Matt de la Peña, Bill Konigsberg, Tom Leveen, Meg Medina, and Jeanette Rallison.

At Día, the few adults in the room—teachers, authors, chaperones, and other program facilitators—all worked to honor the often difficult realities young people have to face. The authors spoke about and against the marginalizing experiences of youth of

color and shared their own stories of growing up with challenges that persist in the lives of youth—bullying,

Despite rhetoric that describes young people as disengaged or as lacking the fight that past generations had, our participants are aware and engaged in their communities in so many ways. They are wide awake and aware, deeply conscious of the oppression, racism, and prejudice that impact their lives, their families, and their communities.

cultural stereotypes, and being the first in their family to attend college. The students also had the opportunity to share their own stories in workshops led by authors, ASU faculty, and local teachers. In the following interview, Tracey Flores explains the vision for Día and the process of creating a space that supports young people.

How and when did “Día de los Niños, Día de los Libros” get started? What is your vision for organizing this program?

This year, Día will celebrate 20 years of literacy events and celebrations across the United States.

The event was created by author/poet Pat Mora. In May 2016, ASU will host its sixth annual Día celebration honoring youth, language, culture, and literacy.

In the first year of planning, event organizers made the shared decision to create a celebration to meet the unique needs of the adolescent reader and writer. Our aim was to engage participants in activities that would capture their individual interests and open their minds to the liberating power of reading and writing. The goal of our celebration was to create a space that would invite students into the world of story by offering interactive literacy workshops that engaged them in various reading and writing activities and honored their unique cultures, gifts, and talents. With each year’s event, we want to encourage students to share their stories and to empower them to read and write every day by providing them access to relevant YA books and visits with published authors who write from perspectives to which they can relate.

The young people who attend are the heart of our Día celebration. In every aspect of our planning, we work to create an event that truly honors their experiences and provides opportunities for self-reflection and self-exploration.

How do programs like Día support young people and their lived realities?

Through the engaging keynote presentations, interactive literacy workshops, and youth performances, Día works to create a welcoming and inclusive space for young people, a space that values different ways of knowing and being. In this space, there is no one way of viewing the world and no one dominant experience that is privileged over another. We understand that the young participants who attend Día come from all over Arizona and bring with them a wide range of interests, talents, cultures, languages, literacies, and identities.

In the larger world, these identities are sometimes silenced, viewed as a source of shame, or looked upon as lacking or in need of fixing or remediation. Día hopes to reverse the negativity that is sometimes imposed on our youth. Día represents a (re)mediation of space, mind, and discourse for both adults and adolescents. We strive to encourage young people to share their stories from their lived experiences, and we acknowledge the value of their voices. We want them to realize the power of their stories and their perspectives; we want to challenge and create a new discourse about youth.

What do programs like Día communicate about young people?

The strength in community. The beauty of cultures and languages. The importance of literacy for empowerment. The power of youth stories and voices. The commitment of youth to be understood, heard, and to make a difference in their world. Despite rhetoric that describes young people as disengaged or as lacking the fight that past generations had, our participants are aware and engaged in their communities in so many ways. They are wide awake and aware, deeply conscious of the oppression, racism, and prejudice that impact their lives, their families, and their communities.

Día is a place for young people to talk with others about issues that matter to them most. Whether the conversation is about racism, prejudice, immigration, or LGBTQ issues, Día allows youth to engage in these discussions, to learn new ways to use the power of their words, spoken and written, and to get their message across and fight in powerful ways.

The authors and poets at Día 2015 all addressed difficult topics. What is your process for selecting speakers for Día? How do you ensure that they engage the audience in ways that are authentic and not didactic or moralistic?

We are so honored to have so many brilliant, compassionate, and caring authors, storytellers, poets, university professors, and community literacy advocates celebrate Día with us. When inviting authors to serve as keynote speakers or present literacy workshops at Día, I like to select authors I love! This is the truth. If I've read their books and enjoyed their stories and know that participants will love them, too, we work to bring them to Día. I'm a little kid when it comes to this aspect of Día. It has always been my dream to be surrounded by my favorite authors because I love stories and writing.

On a more serious note, the topics that authors write about and the messages they share through their writing play key roles in deciding whether to bring them to ASU. We are interested in soliciting authors who, through their writing, speak to the concerns and lives of our youth, tackle tough issues, are real and authentic, and speak the truth about their experiences as young people. Due to the political climate and the decisions of our politicians in Arizona, we have a history of silencing narratives and voices in our schools—not through teachers, but through the banning of books, among other mandates and policies. As mentioned earlier, Día fosters a (re)mediation of space, a counter-space where, thankfully, we have a great deal of autonomy.

Over the years, we've been blessed to host so many talented authors who *genuinely* care about young people. These authors come for the youth! It is inspiring to listen to their message and feel the love they have for what they do, especially their excitement in engaging with our participants.

“Right to Read” is the title of this column. What would you want to tell readers of The ALAN Review (teachers, librarians, teacher educators, and YA authors) about young people’s right to read?

We all have the right to read books that matter to us and speak to our individual experiences. If we take away this right from our young people and censor the books that we allow them to read, we send the message to them that their identities, their experiences, and their voices do not matter. This censorship of books silences the narratives of historically marginalized populations by continuing to privilege the dominant narrative of youth identities and lived experiences. It normalizes a certain youth identity, way of being, and way of knowing.

It is through books that we make sense of our lives. It is through books that we learn about perspectives that differ from our own. It is through books that we can heal and nurture our souls. By taking this away from young people and only placing certain titles in their hands, we do them a huge disservice.

Writing and Embracing Difficult Books

Meg Medina was one of the keynote speakers that Tracey invited to “Día de los Niños, Día de los Libros.” Meg is a Latina writer and award-winning author of books for children and adolescents. Her young adult book, *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* (2013), is a frank portrayal of a young girl who is the victim of bullying. This title won the 2014 Pura Belpré Medal for Latina/o authors whose work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latina/o cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth. In spite of the award and the popularity of the book, it was challenged numerous times because of the word “ass” in the title. As an invited speaker at secondary schools, Meg has experienced both overt

It is through books that we make sense of our lives. It is through books that we learn about perspectives that differ from our own. It is through books that we can heal and nurture our souls.

and subtle forms of censorship, which she discusses in the interview below.

You opened your talk at “Día de los Niños, Día de los Libros” by sharing that, when you announce the title of your book, Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass, “the adults flinch, and the kids smile.” Why do you think the title of this book resonates with youth but not adults?

I imagine that it feels like a small forbidden freedom for students to be able to use a coarse word in a school or library setting where those words can earn you a detention or some other rebuke. And of course, it’s pretty hilarious to hear their teachers and librarians have to say dirty words, too. But on a deeper level, I think there’s an immediate recognition of the language and issues of their daily lives, regardless of what adults think of the usage. I can assure you that the phrase “kick your ass” is by far one of the gentler threats young people make against one another.

I think some adults look at the title and worry that it is just another way that “media” is making the crude more acceptable. They worry that by promoting this title, decency, as they know it, is in peril. And, of course, if they’re educators, they fear that embracing this title will bring parents with pitchforks to their door.

What have been the repercussions of the book’s title in terms of its reception by educators, libraries, schools, and the wider adult public?

The range is so wide. In many places, teachers and librarians have taken the time to educate their principals about the book, and for that I am deeply grateful. But there have certainly been cases where the students’ access to my novel has been politely blocked.

Early on, for example, in my home city of Richmond, Virginia, there was concern about listing my work on a summer reading list. Ultimately, the librarians decided that they could recommend me as an author but not name my book title. Another time, I was disinvented to a school that had contracted me as the keynote for their anti-bullying program. In another instance, the principal opted to keep a box of my books in his office instead of giving them away after my presentation. Students interested in reading *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* had to visit him to request it in person, and he decided if the student was mature enough to read the novel.

What happens most often, though, is that a middle or high school will invite me to visit, but they specifically ask me to discuss my other YA novels instead of *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*. In every case, the reason cited is a version of this: “Our parents will not like this. Our community standards will not allow for this. We will have a flood of complaints.” What’s interesting, of course, is that this guarding of a moral code hasn’t been effective in stopping the epidemic of bullying and violence in our schools. In fact, it may be one of the reasons violence continues to proliferate.

In what ways do you think the soft censorship you experienced undermines young people’s realities?

For all the ways we’d like to reduce teen problems to hormones, pimples, romance, and bad decisions at parties, the concerns of young people are much deeper and scarier than most adults want to admit. There is no such thing as a free pass for young people when it comes to violence. All over the world, they have a ringside seat to it—large and small—and they deserve a means to make sense of it. In the case of *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*, we’re dealing with a realistic depiction of bullying as it is, complete with the random brutality and all the well-intentioned and ineffective adults who are part of the scene. It’s an uncomfortable read, sometimes harrowing, but it lays out the situation as kids experience it.

When we block young people from books that describe their realities, we confirm their worst fears: adults are hopelessly out of touch and unable to understand or help ease their hardship. Worse, refusing to allow access to such books creates even more

For all the ways we’d like to reduce teen problems to hormones, pimples, romance, and bad decisions at parties, the concerns of young people are much deeper and scarier than most adults want to admit.

isolation for kids who are caught in the crosshairs of violence. The censorship implies that the situation is shameful and that people who use those words or experience violent things can't be talked about in polite society. Where does a kid go with the full story of what's happening to her in the face of that kind of abandonment?

So, the question I have for adults in decision-making positions is this: How can young people trust you to help them if you refuse to even name the situations accurately? You can print a million anti-bullying posters. You can create thousands of school assemblies. But it won't work if you are unwilling to be honest.

How have young people responded to the book?

Librarians tell me that the book keeps circulating, with all copies checked out. They tell me that young readers will sometimes reach for the book simply for the title and then find themselves engaged in the story.

Interestingly, in face-to-face meetings with young people, I almost always hear curiosity about Yaqui herself, about what made a girl so angry and violent. They wrestle with what to do about the Yaqui in the book and what to do with the Yaquis in their own lives. I've had many requests to write a novel with Yaqui as the protagonist. The question readers all seem to have is *Why?* Maybe it's the question asked by anyone who has ever been victimized. *Why me? Why did you aim your hate at me?*

You mentioned in your talk that “we owe it to young people to tell them the truth.” What is the truth in Yaqui Delgado for young people? How do you balance telling the truth while contending with adults’ resistance to the often harsh realities of young people’s lives?

The truth is that in this life you may meet many amazing and wonderful people, but you will also meet many broken and violent ones who will make just as much of an impact on you. The truth is that you won't always be able to find reliable adults at your school or in your personal life who can help. Sometimes the “solution” to a problem will be deeply imperfect, but always you'll have to dig for your resilience to survive—even when it is in short supply.

With regard to balancing truth against adult concerns, I try not to consider the adults at all when I'm writing, which is quite a trick since I am part of that pack and have to catch myself. Instead, I consider respect for readers first and foremost. I wrestle with how I can lay out the authentic facts of the story in a way that invites them to consider their own struggles.

Your advice to the young people in the audience that day was to guard their right to read. “Right to Read” is also the title of this column. What would you want to tell readers of The ALAN Review (teachers, librarians, teacher educators, and YA authors) about young people’s right to read?

I believe so strongly in the power of books to help us reflect on the experiences of our lives. That, more than anything else, is the gift that literature offers. In that private act of reading, young people have the chance to tap into self-reflection and empathy. It's where they can ask themselves who they resemble in the pages and—more important—who they want to be in real life.

Through that frame, I can't imagine why we'd want to create obstacles for young people seeking books. Rather than shying away from difficult books, I believe that educators should utterly embrace them, as well as encourage students to self-advocate for their rights through organizations such as the National Coalition Against Censorship.

Final Thoughts

Authors and educators like Meg Medina and Tracey Flores successfully create discursive and literary spaces that honor young people's lived experiences. They convey to adolescents that there are adults in their lives who take their concerns seriously and who believe that young people have the ability to grapple with difficult issues. More important, because they advocate for young people's right to read the books that validate their lived experiences, they position youth as experts on their lived realities and empower them to become agents in their own lives.

Tracey Flores is a former English Language Development (ELD) teacher who worked in elementary classrooms for eight years. She currently serves as the director of El Día

de los Niños, El Día de los Libros, and as the director of youth writing programs for the Central Arizona Writing Project (CAWP) at Arizona State University (ASU). Tracey is also pursuing her PhD in English Education in the Department of English at ASU. Her research focuses on adolescent Latina girls and mothers' language and literacy practices and on using family literacy as a springboard for advocacy, empowerment, and transformation for students, families, and teachers.

Meg Medina, named one of CNN's Ten Visionary Women, is the author of the young adult novel, *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*, which received the Pura Belpré Award in 2014. She is also the author of the novel *The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind* and the picturebooks *Mango Abuela* and *Me and Tia Isa Wants a Car*, for which she won an Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Award. Meg's work examines strong girls, tough circumstances, and the connecting power of culture. When she is not writing, she works on community projects in support of reading, Latino youth, and diversity in children's literature. She lives in Richmond, Virginia.

E. Sybil Durand is an assistant professor of English at Arizona State University where she teaches courses in young adult literature and methods of teaching English. Her scholarship is grounded in postcolonial and curriculum theories, which situate literature and education at the intersections of sociocultural, historical, political, and national contexts. Her research focuses on young adult literature in general and postcolonial young adult literature in particular.

James Blasingame is a professor of English Education at Arizona State University (ASU). He is Executive Director and Past President of the NCTE's Assembly on Literature for Adolescents and a past coeditor of *The ALAN Review*. He is coauthor of the English Journal annual Honor List and editor of the *Print-Based Texts* pages of the International Reading Association's *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. He is a winner of the International Reading Association's Arbuthnot Award, the ASU Parents Association Professor of the Year Award, and the Arizona English Teachers' Association Lifetime Contribution Award.

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Embracing Discomfort in YA Literature

Although I don't set out to make myself or anyone else uncomfortable, discomfort is often central to my writing process. In many cases, it begins with the first flicker of an idea for a book. My file of "next novel" ideas contains an assortment of news snippets, half-formed "what if . . .?" questions, imagined scenarios, and overheard conversations. Often, these bits stick with me because there is something that bothers me, something that needs room to grow in order to be properly understood. These possibilities demand my attention the way a ragged fingernail can become an obsession until you can finally do something about it.

The ideas that become books are the ones that I can't dismiss, the ones that irritate and vex and trouble and fascinate me. And once I start working at making sense of an idea—figuratively filing at its rough edges—I discover that I'm dealing with something more complex than a ragged fingernail. The originating idea opens onto new provocations and problems that I must contend with as I develop my characters and their world. I have to get ready for the long haul with discomfort.

The seed for my first novel, *What Can't Wait* (2011), came from my experiences as an English teacher in a Title I Houston high school where I taught mostly seniors. I worked hard to shepherd my students—many of them reluctant readers with a history of frustrating school experiences—toward a love of reading and, even more urgently, toward college and career possibilities that fit their interests, needs, skills, and motivations. Throughout my teaching, I kept returning to the same question: Why did

my best students—students who were smart, driven, and resourceful—consistently pass up the educational opportunities that seemed to be the best fit for them academically, opting instead to attend decent but unremarkable local colleges and universities?

My discomfort with this reality drove a number of conversations with my students over the years, conversations that unfolded in my classroom before and after school, across the margins of their own writing, and between the shelves of our library. I didn't want to impose my idea of "best" onto my students, but I did want to understand their way of thinking about the future and the pressures and priorities that influenced their choices. I got some insights from the work that students produced through our fall semester's "Planning for the Future" unit, which included research on colleges and careers, college application essays, and the creation of step-by-step strategic plans toward specific goals. But the biggest breakthroughs came through our conversations about YA literature.

My smart, savvy teens wanted a novel that captured the particular challenges and compromises of their world, especially when it came to their families, educational experiences, and social lives. In particular, many of them felt that YA lit made it seem too easy to make it to college as a first generation student, as though a good GPA and an application form were all you needed. What was missing was any acknowledgment of the tension they felt between their own hopes and plans for the future and the expectations of their families, which in our predominantly Latino community often included staying close to home and helping out.

What Can't Wait features a strong female protagonist with a passion for math and a killer work ethic, and her journey toward college is a key thread in the plot. These are features of the narrative that adults readily cleave to, and they are no doubt a big part of why I'm often invited to do talks or workshops related to the novel and its themes. But I wrote the novel for my students first and foremost, and that meant engag-

Whatever my discomfort with making my old neighbors unhappy, being true to my vision for *Out of Darkness* meant excavating and imagining stories from communities too often relegated to the margins of history.

ing with the uncomfortable aspects of the experiences that they shared with me.

Some of the realities I incorporate in the novel have caused little controversy, such as the economic situation of families struggling to make ends meet and relying on contributions from every family member old enough to earn a wage. But other thematic aspects of the novel provoke discomfort or a sense of mild outrage from some readers, especially adults. While the novel doesn't glorify sex, it

also doesn't ignore it. The possibility of sex is powerfully present, even for characters that never actually "go all the way," and a near-rape scene in *What Can't Wait* reflects the high rate of sexual assault (almost always unreported) among my female students.

Profanity shows up in dialogue, as does injustice on the family level (a clear double standard exists for the protagonist and her brother). Teen pregnancy appears as an issue for two secondary characters, and students cut class and do some drinking. When adults question me about these elements (Why couldn't I just keep it clean?), I explain that they're in the novel for the same reason that cockroaches also make appearances: they are part of the characters' world.

As the world of my characters grows darker, so does my portrayal of it. My second novel, *The Knife and the Butterfly* (2012), explores how a deadly gang fight connects a Salvadoran American MS-13 gang member and a troubled White girl whose need for belonging draws her into violent conflict. The novel takes grit to another level, not because I relish vio-

lence, casual sex, crime, teen homelessness, or drug use, but because these were a part of the reality that my protagonist faced as a dropout, a gang member, and a kid on the fringe of the institutions and support systems many of us take for granted.

In *The Knife and the Butterfly*, I worked hard to create a fictional space where, despite all these factors, my characters have a chance to make meaningful choices. For me, this was a way of countering the actual courtroom narrative that unfolded after the violent encounter that inspired the novel, a courtroom narrative that essentially framed young men like the novel's speaker as waste, as disposable people. Driven by my own discomfort with the outcome of the trial, I weighed the risk of dramatizing violence against my desire to humanize and particularize the lives of marginal youth. Rather than redeem the callousness of my characters, I strove to imagine a set of circumstances that might give them room to redeem themselves.

Discomfort has reached new levels of intensity for me in my most recent novel, *Out of Darkness* (2015). Because I was writing for the first time about the East Texas community where I grew up, I experienced a fresh host of worries around how the book might be received. The story is set against a 1937 school explosion that killed nearly 300 children in New London, Texas, and it explores the precarious beauty and eventual fallout of a romance between an African American boy and a Mexican American girl. For nearly two generations after it happened, public discussion of the explosion was taboo, and even recently when *The Texas Observer* (2013) published a story drawn from *Out of Darkness*, I received letters and messages from upset East Texans who didn't like that I'd coupled this tragic piece of history with an exploration of school segregation, sexual predation, racialized violence, and the forces that divide communities and destroy people. But those were all part of the world that the novel recovers and imagines. Whatever my discomfort with making my old neighbors unhappy, being true to my vision for *Out of Darkness* meant excavating and imagining stories from communities too often relegated to the margins of history.

Especially when it comes to historical fiction, resistance to frank engagements with youth culture and experience often draws strength from false nostalgia. Adults may fantasize a simpler, cleaner past, forgetting their own turmoil and refusing to acknowledge

past generations' struggles, many of which were cloaked in painful silence. In my view, the presence of good and evil in the world is pretty much steady; it just gets expressed differently in different eras. If the 1950s offered safer streets than today's suburbs, weigh that against all the heartache of women raising kids alone while dads worked crazy long hours, the pain of openly expressed racism and closeted homosexuality, and the wounds left by sexual abuse that went unrecognized—or unreported—in those same “picture-perfect” neighborhoods. Of course, there have also always been folks making brave, redemptive choices, whether their world is Internet-enabled or just on the cusp of electrification.

In addition to my engagement with historical possibilities, the fictional aspects of *Out of Darkness* presented a powerful challenge in terms of my ability to reckon with discomfort. In its final form, the novel ends with a tragedy very different from the accidental school explosion that opens the story. For months, though, I fought this outcome, trying to evade this even darker scenario and deliver my characters into safety. But *Out of Darkness* turned out to be a novel about narrating disaster to the end, and the story kept on pressing its case. Ultimately, I had to simply name my discomfort—I didn't *want* to write a tragic book—and embrace it. The alternative would have been to do violence to the story itself, to impose an ending that went against the grain of the narrative.

Embracing discomfort is an important part of maturing as a reader, too. If we feel 100% safe with what we're reading, if we meticulously avoid the chance of encountering discomfort, we're also unlikely to be deeply affected by our reading. There has to be an element of risk and exposure in reading for anything profound or memorable to occur. Certainly this experience varies for different readers, even when they are reading the same book, but we all need it to evolve our reading lives. A great book makes us vulnerable to something—an emotion, a thought, a realization, a fear, a discovery, a way of seeing—and it forces us to reckon with it. I share Franz Kafka's (1904) view that “we need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone.” Or, more concisely (and still in Kafka's words): “[A] book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.”

To be sure, discomfort is just one of the ways that literature works on us. Kafka says that we need these difficult books, not that we need *only* these books. Our libraries, brains, and hearts have room for a wide range of YA literature.

Still, I hope my reflections inspire you to take up the work of reading YA novels in class that others may have prematurely dismissed as “not safe for school.” I find it ironic that when racism, violence, teen sex, incest, misogyny, and the like appear in the works of Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Faulkner, we recognize them as part of how these works function as literature. But comparable elements in YA literature too often are taken as rendering a text inappropriate for mainstream classroom consumption—or consumption at all.

Consider the now-classic example offered by Meghan Cox Gurdon's (2011) article “Darkness Too Visible” published in *The Wall Street Journal*. Besides characterizing mainstream young adult fiction as “bulldoz[ing] coarseness or misery” into children's lives, Gurdon suggests that, if it weren't for YA, there wouldn't be darkness in young people's lives—an almost obscenely naïve assumption in the eyes of anyone who has worked with teens from any background. Life doesn't wait for kids to grow up before confronting them with pain, suffering, injustice, abuse, and other assorted ugliness. Even “good” adolescences come with discomfort and challenge, and teens blessed with the most stable, wholesome life circumstances still interact daily with peers who are not so lucky.

In my view, teens urgently need opportunities to navigate discomfort and to use it to understand themselves and their world more fully. This is what becomes possible when challenging, complex YA literature is taken up seriously in the classroom. It makes little sense to attempt to “protect” students from uncomfortable topics when any teen with a library card, laptop, tablet, or phone can access more media, and faster, than the young people of any past

If we feel 100% safe with what we're reading, if we meticulously avoid the chance of encountering discomfort, we're also unlikely to be deeply affected by our reading.

generation. And reading about a topic or discussing it in class does not constitute endorsement any more than writing about it does. These actions are, rather, ways of opening up dialogue and critical engagement. In fact, the most responsible move for teachers and other stakeholders is to provide access to diverse reading encounters in settings where students can negotiate and develop their responses. Rather than act as gatekeepers or custodians, we can best support students if we present ourselves as fellow travellers on a journey to make sense of our reading experiences, however uncomfortable.

As educators continue working out how to position challenging YA literature more centrally in the curriculum, I'll continue to write books the only way I know how: by opening myself up to the uncomfortable aspects of human experience, working to draw them into the light, and searching for the intersections between pain and possibility. My hope is always that—if the narratives I craft are at all like Kafka's axe—they manage to connect even as they cut, to produce opportunities for meaning in part *because* they produce discomfort.

Ashley Hope Pérez is the author of three novels: *Out of Darkness* (2015), named a 2016 Printz Honor title, *The Knife and the Butterfly* (2012), and *What Can't*

Wait (2011). She started writing for young adults in part thanks to her experiences with the National Writing Project and the urging of her amazing students at César E. Chávez High School in Houston. Ashley now holds a doctorate in comparative literature and is a visiting assistant professor at The Ohio State University where she teaches courses on topics like global youth narratives and love in world literature. She lives in Columbus, Ohio, with her husband Arnulfo and two sons, Liam Miguel and Ethan Andrés. Ashley loves to interact with teachers, students, and anybody interested in books and ideas. Find her online at www.ashleyperez.com and on Facebook and Twitter (@ashleyperez). Email her at novels@ashleyperez.com.

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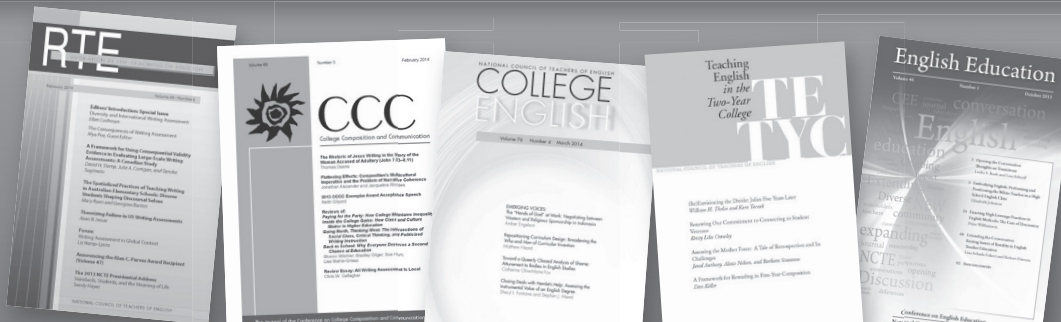
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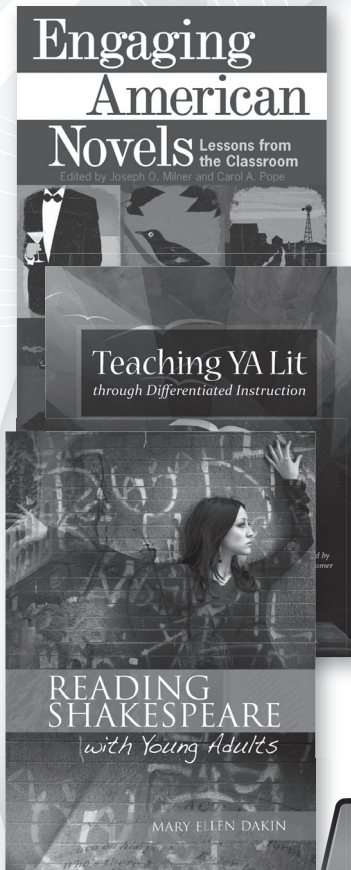
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