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From the Editors

Rethinking "Normal" and Embracing Differences

"To be careful with people and with words was a rare and beautiful thing" (Sáenz, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe,* 2012, p. 324). With this line, Sáenz points to the sacredness of language, particularly as we use that language to build up or tear down those we know—and those we don't. We use language to discriminate differences and to make sense of and give meaning to our perceptions, but being discriminate can result in unfair judgment—both subtle and overt—when we fail to consider the unique stories of those to whom we assign our assumptions.

In this issue, contributors help us think carefully and critically about how language, woven through story, can invite exploration of difference centered on (dis)ability, sexual identity or orientation, gender, race, nationality, culture, age, and/or physical appearance. They encourage us to consider how young adult literature might help readers consider their own and others' uniqueness and how it might challenge deficit perspectives of the Other that are too often forwarded by the dominant narrative. They describe, too, the difficulties that can result from such attempts at engagement in educational settings.

We begin this issue with an article that reminds readers of the importance of their work in the education of young people. In his inspirational speech from the 2015 ALAN Breakfast in Minneapolis, Minnesota, "Good Teachers Save Lives," Chris Crutcher pulls no punches in conveying the lasting impact of teachers who value the individual stories of students.

In "Rethinking 'Normal': A Collaborative Conversation," award-winning YA authors Sharon Draper, Margarita Engle, Benjamin Alire Sáenz, and Holly Goldberg Sloan explore this issue's theme by examining definitions of normalcy and exploring how stories might help readers consider their own and others' uniqueness, offer counter examples of lives and experiences that differ from those most commonly accepted as normal, and invite adolescent readers to learn about themselves as they live the experiences of characters vicariously.

In "Becoming Mockingjays: Encouraging Student Activism through the Study of YA Dystopia," Sean P. Connors describes how he used critical inquiry projects to engage his learners in an examination of the political themes expressed in dystopian fiction. Connors argues that by designing literacy instruction that invites students to speak over oppressive ideologies, they may become empowered agents capable of using reading and writing to act on and transform the world.

Michelle Ann Abate's "'The Tricky Reverse Narration That Impels Our Entwined Stories': Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Queer Temporalities" explores how the treatment of time in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) embodies an important and underexplored method for viewing, discussing, and understanding the graphic memoir and offers an extended meditation on queer temporalities. The analysis complicates the text's representation of coming of age and coming out and yields new critical insights and pedagogical approaches to a narrative that young adults are reading inside and outside of classroom settings.

In their article, "The Stonewall Book Awards for Children's and Young Adult Literature, 2010–2014: Memorable Characters, Current Directions," Janis M. Harmon and Roxanne Henkin describe their narrative analysis of award-winning LGBT books. They closely examine depictions of characters to offer a deeper understanding of the high-quality LGBT books currently available to adolescents, suggesting both how respect for individual differences is reflected in young adult literature in diverse and positive ways and how more can and should be done to achieve this aim.

In his article, "A Multitude of Stories: The Power of Short Story Collections to Disrupt 'Single Stories,'" Stephen Adam Crawley offers ideas for how YA short story collections can disrupt single stories by providing diverse narratives within a single text. He forwards the multiple and overlapping identities that exist within the transgender community, authentic and accurate texts that portray these varied identities, and opportunities for how educators and young adult readers might use the texts to showcase and explore the diversity within a particular cultural group.

Victoria Singh Gill offers a literary analysis of *Ms. Marvel* (Wilson & Alphona, 2014) in her piece, "'Everybody Else Gets to Be Normal': Using Intersectionality and *Ms. Marvel* to Challenge 'Normal' Identity." Her exploration of the issues that first-generation Americans and females of color experience, as exemplified by the main character, Kamala Khan, demonstrates how *Ms. Marvel* challenges deficit perspectives and how educators can use this text to resist labels or "othering" and work toward understanding students' multiple layers of identity.

Siobhan McIntyre and Alan Brown describe their collaboration during an adolescent literature course that resulted in their article, "Dare to Be Different: Celebrating Difference and Redefining Disability in Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*." They examine the ways students can use personal narrative to engage in critical conversations centered on the concept of normalcy, deepen their understanding of disability, and work to unite diverse communities of students.

In "Finding His Voice and Capturing Hearts: Chatting with Novelist Vince Vawter," scholars Melissa Comer and Kristen Pennycuff Trent interview Vince Vawter, author of *Paperboy* (2013). Vawter shares his writing process, which required him to "pull off a lot of old scabs" in order to honestly depict his narrator's speech impediment and journey to find his voice.

Our incoming columnists and column editors begin their work with this issue—and we are thrilled with the result. Book in Review: A Teaching Guide, written by Toby Emert, presents "Of Birkenstocks and Chromosomes and Spiders Who Spell Well." Emert discusses gender role perceptions and how teachers can engage their students in conversations about this important topic through the use of several texts, including *None of the Above* (Gregorio, 2015), *George* (Gino, 2015), *If You Could Be Mine* (Farizan, 2013), and *Ugly Children* (Cronn-Mills, 2012). Emert reminds us about how powerful a tool YA literature can be in helping adolescents deconstruct stereotypes and think critically about perceptions.

In his Right to Read column, Angel Daniel Matos invites Robert Bittner to share his thinking on the relationship between identity, censorship, and young adult literature. In the resulting piece, "Fear of the Other: Exploring the Ties between Gender, Sexuality, and Self-Censorship in the Classroom," Bittner encourages readers to consider their own acts of self-censorship and the resulting implications on young people's visions of themselves and others.

The Layered Literacies column, "Follow, Like, Dialogue, and Connect with Young Adult Authors via Social Media," features new column editor Peggy Semingson. She guides readers in understanding the ways they might help students and teachers access, learn from, connect with, and grow with other educators and authors. She argues that social media connections allow for a deep exploration of the nuanced and complex facets of books and authorship.

Kwame Alexander and Jason Reynolds bring this issue to a close, but they invite continued thinking and reflection on issues of difference in literature and life. In their collaborative conversation, "The Irresponsibility of Oversimplification," they describe how language, as used in story, invites exploration of difference and how they craft characters and settings that extend beyond stereotypes, offering readers both complexity and connection.

We hope that this issue leaves you inspired to ponder how we might help young adult readers understand that "a person is so much more than the name of a diagnosis on a chart" (Draper, 2010, p. 23) and ask themselves, as they grow up in a labels-oriented

world: "You're going to spend more time with yourself than with anyone else in your life. You want to spend that whole time fighting who you are?" (Sanchez, 2007, p. 139).

References

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Call for Manuscripts

Submitting a Manuscript:

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

Fall 2017: Advocacy, Activism, and Agency in Young Adult Literature
Submissions due on or before March 1, 2017

Given their age and perceived lack of power in an adult-run world, adolescents may experience helplessness, cynicism, or frustration—either from not being able to address issues that anger or frustrate them or from their inability to evoke change in the face of obstacles over which they have little to no control. As teachers, however, we recall moments of insight and passion and optimism displayed by our students in response to literature. We believe that stories can empower readers, and we wonder just how far-reaching such empowerment can extend, especially in classrooms and libraries that invite young people to question, to argue, to imagine what is possible—and what they can do to achieve it.

For this issue, we encourage you to share examples of how you promote advocacy, activism, and agency among students (and/or their teachers, families, etc.) using young adult literature. How are these efforts depicted and advanced by authors? How do readers witness and respond to such efforts? How might YAL be used to inspire action in the classroom and larger community? Can story serve to better our world and the lives of those who live here?

As we ponder, we hear the voice of Emil Sher's teen protagonist when he chooses to take responsibility for a challenging dilemma before it becomes too late for action: "I wanted to clean up the mess . . . . The mess would keep spreading like those huge oil spills that turn blue water black and leave birds so covered with oil they never fly again" (*Young Man with Camera*, p. 108). We recognize the challenges inherent in assuming agency, advocating, and acting, but we find hope in Kekla Magoon's reminder: "The river moves, but it follows a path. When it tires of one journey, it rubs through some rock to forge a new way. Hard work, but that's its nature" (*The Rock and the River*, p. 283).

Winter 2018: (All) in the Family: Conceptions of Kinship in Young Adult Literature
Submissions due on or before due July 1, 2017

The idea of family is complicated by the reality of life. While some may envision family as consisting of those to whom we are related by blood, others might hold a more inclusive definition. Family might be associated with home and safety and tradition and love or connected to feelings of betrayal and loss and loneliness and anger. Although our unique experiences with family might conjure differing definitions and perceptions along the continuum, we all likely have some type of emotional response to the concept.

We wonder how YA literature might influence how young people make sense of their own families. How is family perceived and depicted—conventionally? contemporarily? What roles do parents and guardians, extended family members, siblings, neighbors, teachers, caregivers, etc. play in defining family? Is it true that "Everyone plays a purpose, even fathers who lie to you or leave you behind" (Silvera, *More Happy Than Not*, 2015, p. 84)? We are curious, too, as to how YA titles might help readers consider the moral obligation to stand by family. Is the family bond immutable, or can/should we cut ties and under what circumstances? Do we agree that "[N]o matter what, we're still family, even if we don't want to be" (Quintero, *Gaby, A Girl in Pieces*, 2014, p. 168)? As educators, we want to know how you have reached out to families to foster young people's reading and engagement with stories. How and why have you valued and celebrated the funds of knowledge and lived experiences of those in our students' families?

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