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# ALAN REVIEW

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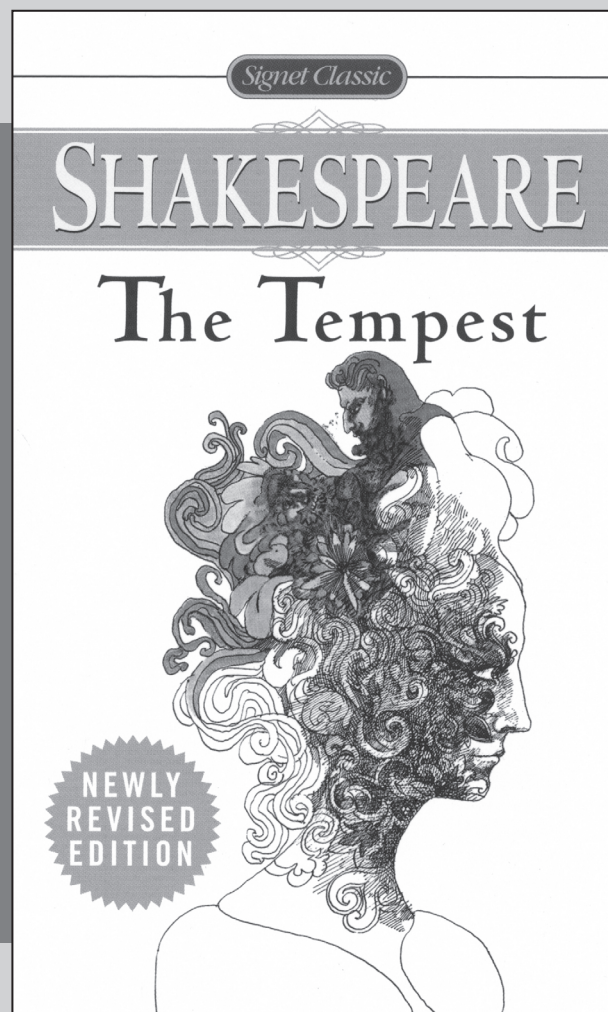
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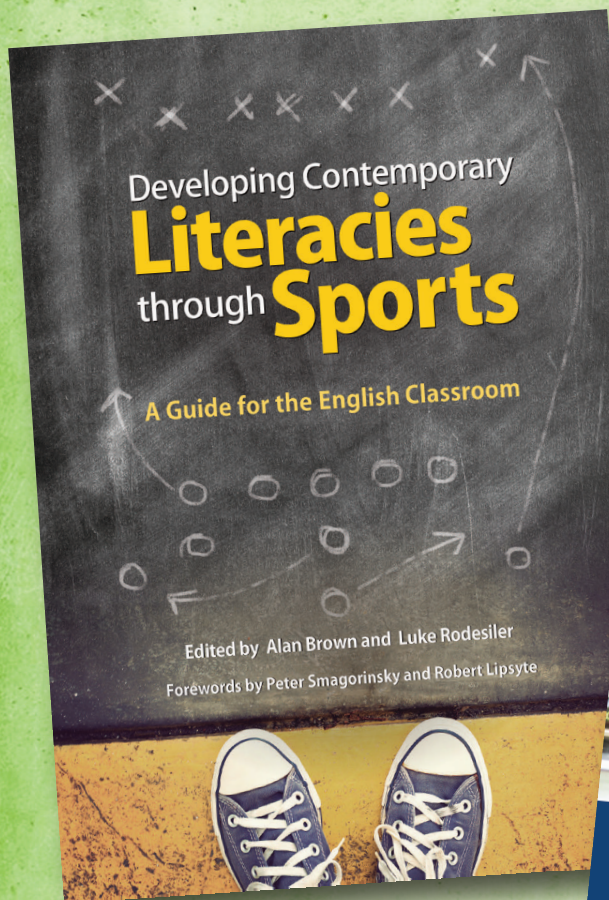
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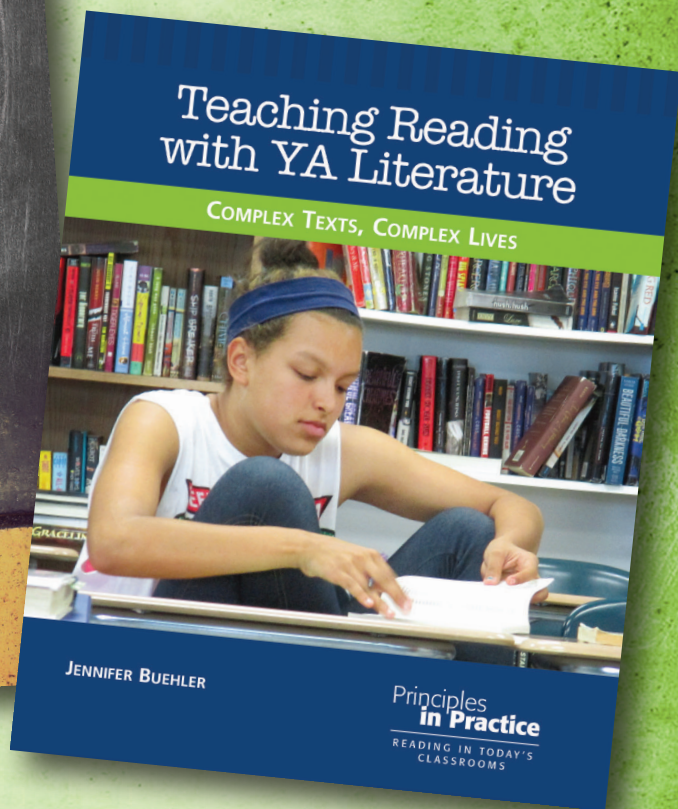


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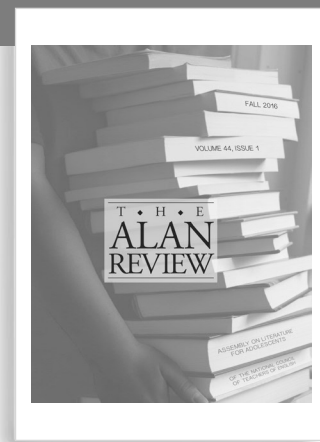
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**AUDIENCE.** Many of the individual members of ALAN are classroom teachers of English in middle, junior, and senior high schools. Other readers include university faculty members in English and/or Education programs, researchers in the field of young 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.

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**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*.**

<b>FALL (October) Issue Deadline:</b>	<b>MARCH 1</b>
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<b>SUMMER (June) Issue Deadline:</b>	<b>NOVEMBER 1</b>

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## From the Editors

Rethinking “Normal” and Embracing Differences

“**T**o 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 under-explored 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).

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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](mailto: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.

## Good Teachers Save Lives:

Speech Delivered at the 2015 ALAN Breakfast, Minneapolis, Minnesota

It's hard to overstate what an honor it is to speak at an ALAN Breakfast honoring Lois Lowry. In my world, there are no humans with more grace and no writers more deserving.

On this occasion, I feel compelled to tell my favorite Lois Lowry story. A number of years ago, I was once again staring at my bright white, blank computer screen, praying to the email gods for that *ding* that signals the urgency to check my emails *as they come in*—because who knows when another Ugandan prince will need my financial information so he can unload fabulous wealth upon me—when an email arrives from Lois. She has contacted some of her most trusted author friends, and me, for advice regarding an ongoing situation. A classroom of sixth graders has begun emailing her, one-by-one, with comments and questions about *The Giver* (1993). As any author knows, when this happens, you get 40 versions of “Where do you get your ideas?” For many years, I answered that question with the name of some obscure town: Potlatch, Idaho; Bear Creek, Michigan; Rome, Georgia. It was never a satisfactory answer, but it kept me somewhat geographically savvy. Then I started answering with, “From people who want me to read their manuscripts.” That actually *did* work among a certain subset.

But Lois is smarter and far more practical than I am, so she asked one of the kids to send her the teacher's email so she could ask the teacher to screen the questions, allowing her to answer the oft-asked ones just once and spend more time on the creative ones—the ones where the kid really wanted to know

something. What came back was a scathing rejoinder from the teacher telling Lois she should be happy to have her material used in her classroom and that from now on, it wouldn't be, and behind that came responses from the students filled with “I hated your book,” “You suck,” and the like.

Lois was asking this select group of writers how *we* might respond. I don't know exactly what kind of grown-up responses she received from the others, but I told her there were a number of men in the drug court group I was leading who had served long prison terms, some of them for particularly violent crimes, and that she should figure out how to get the teacher's home address so I could send them to terrify her in the middle of the night . . . and then kill her.

Later that morning, I received word from an untraceable email with nothing but a home address.

There may very well be one fewer English teacher here today . . . .

What could I do? It was Lois Lowry.

Many years ago, when Chris Crutcher could just as easily have been a guy named Chris who made walking sticks for people with broken legs as a guy who wrote books about smart-ass adolescents, I was invited to Simmons College in Boston to deliver a keynote and then participate on a two-person panel with Robert Cormier. Suffice it to say, I knew exactly who Robert Cormier was, and he probably thought I was a guy named Chris who made walking sticks for people with broken legs. But Bob (he told me to call him that) was as gracious to me as he was to all who entered his sphere of influence, and when the day

was finished, I felt something like a writer. At dinner, we talked about our experiences with the business of book censorship and, among other things, agreed that the folks who really take the heat are *you*. While you're pushing your shopping cart through the supermarket getting a late dinner for your family because you stayed after school an extra two hours grading papers, or walking a student through some horror, or listening to the whispers of conservative parents who know absolutely nothing about education or child development talk about how you're purposely corrupting their children by assigning *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*. (Blume, 1970), we're alone in the safety of our homes writing another book you're gonna have some 'splainin' to do for assigning.

But good teachers save lives.

It has been recommended to me by editors, marketers, and other authors that it's a good idea when speaking to teachers or librarians from all over the country to push your latest work. Well, my latest work is two years past due because I have the same excuses for my editor that I had for my sophomore English teacher. But it's really, really good, and when it comes out, be sure to buy it. In hardback. There.

Now I get to talk about teachers. And about *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (1993), which is fast becoming historical fiction.

Many years ago, at the same time I was desperately trying to find the voice for Sarah Byrnes, I was in a meeting at the Spokane Mental Health Center with a group of therapist colleagues and the Center's child psychiatrist, who met with us once a week to discuss our toughest cases. In the course of the meeting, one of the therapists asked for permission to expel a 16-year-old female client from the Center. Now, I get it about being expelled from school, but *expelled from a mental health center?* What kid needs *that* on her resume? The psychiatrist asked why he would expel a person from our mental health center, and the therapist, who I'll call Jim because that's his name, said it was because she punched him in the chest. Now I'd been wanting to punch this guy in the chest for a long time and figured this kid might have some saving graces, so I volunteered that I'd worked with some pretty tough kids in a dropout school down in Oakland, and I'd be willing to take a shot at this one, you know, before we expelled her from a mental health center. Jim was resistant, probably because of

the dent in his chest, but he acquiesced.

The client, who I'll call Brenda because that's *her* name, showed up at our appointed time, and the first thing I noticed was this kid had had about as much therapy as she could stand. She was court-ordered, so not showing up would have caused her way more grief than compliance, but it was clear our relationship would start out adversarial. She stood in the door to my office, one hand on the knob, car keys in the other, glaring. I thought, if I'm any kind of therapist, I can get her all the way into the room before the hour is up. I dug down for my most engaging, embracing, tolerant self and got nothing from her but *very* short answers. Yes, no, yes, no, maybe, who cares, it's

in my file, kiss my ass. I noticed as she was adding nothing to my fund of knowledge about her that she was digging along the seam of her jeans with the tip of her car key. Halfway through the session, the seam was open from just below the waist to halfway down her leg, and the tip of the key was red. By the time the session was over, she'd made it all the way to the knee.

And she had not moved one step toward me. I silently admitted defeat and began to wrap it up. I said, "Are you pissed off at me?"

She said, "No. Why?"

I pointed to her damaged jeans and bleeding leg.

She told me to do something that's actually anatomically impossible to do, fired the keys at me, and stormed out.

*I did it!* I thought, clutching her keys. *She's got to come all the way back in here to get these.*

*And I just found my Sarah Byrnes.*

Sometimes progress is measured in baby steps.

But over the next several sessions, I got a foot in the door to her pain. She moved farther into my office, actually took a seat. Little by little, she tested my willingness to hear and not judge, and pieces of her story came to light. Her parents had adopted her as a playmate for her older brother (*that* didn't pan out; he hated her). Her adopted father, whom she loved, often beat her so that her adopted mother wouldn't beat her

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**Little by little, [Brenda] tested my willingness to hear and not judge, and pieces of her story came to light.**

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harder. She had always had to get to the one thing she loved—sports—any way she could, often walking up to five miles to get to the gym or track or field. Like a lot of kids in her situation, foster care created at least as many problems as it solved. Things would get violent at home so she'd get removed, but being away created so much anxiety she'd blow out of foster

home after foster home until there was nothing to do but send her back into this crazy family. In, out, in, out. I can't tell you the number of times during a session when all I could do was tether myself to some solid anchor in my own life and jump off the cliff with her. And this kid was tougher than kids get.

But sometimes, if you listen closely enough and allow your imagination full range, a truth arises; an anchor for *her* life. In Brenda's case, it was Mrs. Richardson, her third-grade teacher. Smart as she was, Brenda hated school and

had succeeded in driving most of her teachers away, or at least keeping them at a safe distance. But not Mrs. Richardson. Bit by bit, Mrs. Richardson would float to the surface of Brenda's stories about her elementary school life. "She just listened to me," Brenda told me once. "She believed me and didn't judge me or tell me that everything would be all right." On weekend days when Brenda couldn't get a ride to her soccer or softball game or her track meet, Mrs. Richardson would magically show up, maybe a block away from Brenda's house, at exactly the right time with a ride. On the way home, there would be time for ice cream. She would keep Brenda after school some days to get her studies done, knowing the chaos of home would never produce finished homework.

Somehow Brenda made it. She graduated from high school and was able to get scholarships in soccer, softball, and cross country, which let her piece together a college education. She met a guy, another

athlete, who, like Mrs. Richardson, saw through the white hot fog of her rage into her heart and hung in there with her.

Brenda and I had sporadic contact through her college and early working years. She'd call in a crisis, and we'd dig through her bag of tricks for something that would allow her to get a handhold long enough to pull herself back up. I remember one day as we walked down the hall past the kids' playroom at my private practice office, she glanced in to see a young guy punching the heavy bag while he cussed out his "bad dad." On our way out at the end of that session, she walked into the now-empty playroom and went after the heavy bag. I tried to give her the gloves, to no avail, and stopped her when the heavy bag began spotting red. Her knuckles were ragged, but her soul was now quiet.

Then one day I opened my mailbox to find an elegant, engraved envelope containing her wedding announcement. I remember thinking, either she has a really good job or this is going to be a small wedding because this announcement is *expensive*. She must have read my mind because inside the card was a scribbled note saying, "Don't be a dumbass. I only sent two of these expensive ones. To the two people who saved my life."

Truth is, I came along way too late to save Brenda's life. If it hadn't been for Mrs. Richardson, I'd have never met Brenda. At best, I was a conduit.

The wedding was held in a local park in summertime. Brenda was decked out in an elegant white wedding dress, complete with wedding veil and a long train. And running shoes. She and I stood waiting for the ceremony to start, talking about the curious path leading here through the chaos of her life, doing a quick fist bump celebrating her TKO of Jim the Therapist, when a ten-year-old Datsun station wagon pulled into the parking lot and a middle-aged woman stepped out. Brenda broke off in mid-sentence and shot across the grass toward Mrs. Richardson, the long train whipping behind her. She looked like a kite. She didn't knock Mrs. Richardson over when she jumped into her arms, but it was close.

They stood laughing and crying, hugging, stepping back, hugging again. They hadn't seen each other since Brenda's third grade. When I thanked Mrs. Richardson for all the fine work she'd done for me over

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**Bit by bit, Mrs. Richardson would float to the surface of Brenda's stories about her elementary school life.**

**"She just listened to me," Brenda told me once.**

**"She believed me and didn't judge me or tell me that everything would be all right."**

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the years, I'm pretty sure she thought either I had her mixed up with someone else or was in need of mental health services of my own.

That should have contributed all the pieces I needed for my happy ending. The human's life who had provided the *voice* for Sarah Byrnes had turned out better than my fictional character. But we were out of fiction and back into the real world. I maintained contact with Brenda because, as most of you know, wedded bliss as a cure-all can be overstated. When Brenda gave birth to her first daughter, we began making regular contact because she was well aware of the possibility of the horrors of her childhood leaking through, and of course there were the anger issues she had always dealt with, as well as the need to attend to some interpersonal skills required to keep a marriage afloat.

The one thing we always had to fall back on, when depression snuck up on her or rage exploded from some corner where she let vigilance slip, was physical activity. She could punch out the heavy bag, take a long hard bike ride, go for a run, or take it out on some unsuspecting member of a rival soccer team. The extreme athletic world was her milieu.

Her athletic trail led her to mountain biking. Mountain biking had all the elements a girl with a near-death wish could want—steep hills, rocky trails, the opportunity to knock some overly aggressive rival off the road and down the hill.

But then, on a Monday morning in the fall, my phone rang.

Brenda: Ya gotta come see me, man.

Me: Where are you?

Brenda: Deaconess. The rehab center.

I figured some other Brenda-like mountain biker had gotten a leg up on her.

I walked into Brenda's room at Deaconess to see her lying flat, immobilized.

She had gone over to the coast to a two-day mountain bike event. At the end of a relatively unsuccessful Saturday, she returned to her hotel, feeling something wrong in her legs. She just didn't feel the coordination she always counted on. By Sunday night, she was technically a quadriplegic. No control of her legs and only large motor control in her arms and hands.

Progressive MS. Not going to get better. Get used to it. That's how her colossally insensitive doctor said it.

I don't curse the universe much, but walking back to the car that day, I gave thanks that her paralysis was so complete she couldn't kill herself and silently told everyone who ever told me God doesn't give us more than we can endure to kiss my ass. Our one refuge was wiped out. No matter how bad things got, no matter how bleak the future, Brenda could always bring herself back through physical challenge. And it was a place I could join her. And it was gone.

But my real-life Sarah Byrnes was twice as tough as my fictional Sarah Byrnes and ten times as tough as me. Her insurance company reduced the number of physical therapy sessions they were willing to pay for because her condition was expected to

get progressively worse. But she was such an inspiration to the other members of her therapy group that the physical therapist offered to treat her free. The hospital wouldn't allow it because of liability. In true Sarah Byrnes form, she said fuck 'em. Anything I can do at the rehab center, I can do at home. And fuck 'em for telling me I won't get better.

Brenda took on her rehab like it was Olympic, and against all conventional wisdom, the harder she worked, the better she got. Small motor coordination *did* return in her arms and hands, and she learned to manage. In fact, she started playing wheelchair basketball. The craziness of the insurance/SSI/greedy health system wouldn't allow her to own apparatuses she needed to improve. The monetary value of those apparatuses automatically reduced her aid money.

So, in true Sarah Byrnes form, *I* said fuck 'em. I am now the proud owner of a whole bunch of rehab structures I hope I don't live long enough to have to use.

Brenda called one day to tell me she wanted to go to the Y. She wanted to swim. I said, "Brenda, you couldn't swim worth a damn before the MS." She said, "Are you a lifeguard or not?"

I swear, we got in the water with a system of floaties she could have used to swim from Cuba, and she swam 500 yards. That's twenty lengths of the pool. On the way out, she saw a teenager working with some grade-school kids on the climbing wall. He

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**[M]y real-life Sarah Byrnes was twice as tough as my fictional Sarah Byrnes and ten times as tough as me.**

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heard her ask me, “Why can’t I do that?” He said, “No reason” and helped her into the harness. Brenda made it *one handhold* away from the top on arm strength alone. When he brought her down, she slugged him in the shoulder, her version of a hug, and said, “Next time.”

I had breakfast with Brenda about a week ago. She walked into the diner, her crutches under her arms (just in case), sat down, and showed me pictures of her daughters: one on a graduate Fulbright fellowship in Brazil teaching English and environmental science at a remote university in the rainforest, the other an eight-year-old playing soccer two age groups up. “She scares me, Chris. You think *I* was bad.”

I did think she was bad. And I think she is good.

And without that teacher coming along at just the right time, with just the right combination of toughness and compassion, This. Shit. Doesn’t. Happen.

Good teachers save lives.

Thank you for your time and attention, and thank you for all you do.

**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 10 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 Publishers 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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# Rethinking “Normal”:

## A Collaborative Conversation

**From the Editors:** In this article, we are honored to feature a written conversation between several YA authors who have addressed explicitly issues of normalcy and difference in their presentations and writings. We appreciate the generous response of these authors (and their publishers) and their willingness to engage so thoughtfully and candidly in this public collaboration.

As to process, we generated and sent a series of questions to each author. We compiled the responses into a single document and then sent the compiled version back and forth to authors to solicit questions, elaborations, and revisions until all were satisfied with the resulting piece. We hope you appreciate and learn from the wisdom shared.

**In your experience, does “normalcy” exist? Is there any such thing as a normal teenager? A normal adult? A normal writer?**

**Sharon:** There is no such thing as normal. Each day brings new experiences, new possibilities. A full moon. A broken heart. A stubbed toe. Giggles. Raisin bread. A dirty diaper. A song. The good writer manages to combine all of these into a story, a created life, a character who can be as “normal” or different as the author chooses. That is the magic of the creative process. I’m proud to be considered a writer who can see those positive (as well as negative) aspects of human behavior, fictionalize them, and use created characters and situations to help

real people feel just a bit of our human potential. Normal? I still don’t know what that is.

**Margarita:** We’re all unique. Our life stories are weird! Mine is so strange that it could be called magical realism, which—as Gabriel García Márquez pointed out—is typical of Caribbean reality. That makes me normal for *el Caribe*, when normal means average. On the other hand, when normal means meeting a standard of expectation, I’m not a normal Cuban-American, because I traveled back and forth as a child, and I’m neither an exile nor a refugee.

**Holly:** To me, something that is called normal is expected. The irony of teenage life is that nearly all things are new, untried, and sometimes even beyond explanation and expectation. I believe it is normal at all stages of life to feel at times abnormal.

But there are things that make a person immediately feel different from a group. This can be an external condition—something physical that separates a person. Or it can be something inside, unseen but felt. I have written about a character who has areas in which she is exceptional, and that can be equally isolating and not normal.

I think we all long to fit in, to be accepted, appreciated, and loved. But at the same time, there is a strong pull to express what makes us unique and to understand and celebrate that.

**Benjamin:** Normalcy can be defined as the opposite of apocalypse. None of us can live in heightened moments all of the time, and in that sense, normalcy is necessary for survival. We all need to normalize our lives because we all need a sense of safety and order. That's why we all have our own rituals—either rituals that are entirely personal or rituals we've acquired from social or religious institutions. I think normalcy can be a good thing, but if we understand the word in terms of just fitting in, it can hamper freedom, hamper the way we express ourselves, and hamper our imaginations, which is a kind of death.

**Margarita:** As far as normalcy for writers, that would be boring! As a poet, I need to experiment, being honest with my thoughts and emotions instead of trying to fit a formula.

**Benjamin:** Writers? Normal writers? I don't think so. To begin with, we spend hours keeping our own company. Or rather in the company of people we've made up. But we're normal in most ways. We're stealth normal. I don't think I've ever really wanted to fit in. And I do think I'm often on the edge of normal. On the edge. But still normal. Certainly, on a psychological level, I'm normal. I think I have a developed sense of imagination. Well, I'm a writer and a painter and a poet. Most people are not writers or painters or poets. But that doesn't mean I'm not normal—though a lot of people I know always tell me, “Ben, you are so *not* normal.”

**Margarita:** I love all these different definitions of normal, with subtle distinctions that could be regarded as proof of variety, diversity, and complexity of normalcy.

*How might stories help readers consider their own and others' uniqueness?*

**Benjamin:** There is an intimate dance going on between the book and the reader. Reading is necessarily interpretive. So every reader does in fact read a book in a very unique way. Each brings a unique self to the experience that is culturally bound and also bound by the personality and knowledge the

reader has acquired. Every reader will find his or her own way of experiencing the text, and that's why books are so important—because when we read something, it's a very intimate and beautiful thing.

**Sharon:** I think the reason I began to love books as a child was that I was able to read about thousands of other people for whom “normal” was very different from my own life experiences. Because of those books, I learned about other cultures and religions, about different ways to approach life's experiences, about characters who dared. I think it is our uniqueness as human beings that makes the world full of wonderful possibilities. In spite of all the horror and cruelty we have inflicted on each other, I still find that the capacity to love and care and forgive is our greatest achievement.

**Margarita:** I hope young readers of my poetic memoir, *Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings* (2015), will see that they're not the only ones with divided selves. History split my life—and my extended family—in half. It is unique, and at the same time typical, for the children of immigrants to grow up wondering about the invisible twins left behind in their parents' countries of origin. Benjamin and Sharon have pointed out the individual perspective of each reader. That is absolutely true, and at the same time, it is true that certain universal experiences are shared, such as loneliness, fear, hope . . . .

**Holly:** I think that stories and characters can teach empathy. They allow us to travel to places we've never been and to experience feelings that might be unfamiliar. The first word out of a baby's mouth is never “share.”

**Margarita:** Yes, Holly is showing us that *share* can have different meanings, too. We share universal aspects of experience, but that's different than sharing reactions. There are so many emotional responses to the same incident. After the Missile Crisis, I reacted to the loss of contact with Cuba by growing more attached to childhood memories, practicing Spanish by traveling in other parts of Latin America, and clinging to my Cuban-American

identity. My older sister reacted by deliberately forgetting Spanish and regarding herself as entirely American. Each person finds her own way to cope with personal challenges and historical traumas.

***How might stories offer counter examples of lives and experiences that differ from those most commonly accepted as normal?***

**Holly:** A story is worth telling if it asks a reader to question something in the world. Again, this goes back to empathy. Sometimes not caring is simply not understanding. Most failures are of imagination.

**Sharon:** From the time I was a child, stories were magical, not because they told of fanciful characters and adventures, but because they offered me a world of possibilities, many of which were decidedly not “normal” for a sheltered little girl from the city. I read about geniuses and explorers, about tyrants and villains, about murderers and rapists. I read about women who dared to challenge men, who dressed as men to survive, who ruled men successfully. I read about people who lived with what were considered to be severe disabilities, yet managed to thrive and exceed expectations. I also read hundreds of other novels and biographies and histories and texts. I suppose much of one’s early reading forms a base from which a writer begins, but my characters grow from a seed as I begin writing, then grow to face a challenge—sometimes personal, sometimes social, usually both. The characters then begin to be “real people” for me. I don’t really think about their “normalcy.” I look to their strength, their uniqueness, their power to propel the reader through the story.

**Benjamin:** Well, speaking as a Latino and a gay man, there are culturally accepted norms that have nothing to do with “normal” and everything to do with moral and cultural constructions. Unfortunately, American culture “others” groups of people, which is to say dehumanizes people who are thought to be different. All of my books offer a vision of people just being people. You could say I normalize Latinos. And you could say I normalize being gay. Being Latino is not a topic in my books.

Nor is being gay. The topics of my books: What it’s like to struggle with ourselves and the people around us.

My characters live between exile and belonging. My protagonists see themselves as outsiders, and they want to be a part of something bigger than themselves—but they just don’t know how to go about doing the “belonging” thing. Yes, my characters are mostly Latinos (though not exclusively). And yes, my characters are sometimes gay (but certainly not all of them). But always I want to create characters who feel like people.

When we read a good book where the characters feel real, then we experience both ourselves and the characters who are totally different from us; a bridge has been crossed, and we live in the same country.

**Margarita:** I was born hyphenated. As a Cuban-American, travel to the island was—and still is—a bridge between my two languages and cultures. *Enchanted Air* is a memoir, but the characters in my historical verse novels are often hyphenated, too. *Lion Island, Cuba’s Warrior of Words* (2016) is about a civil rights hero of the island’s Chinese-African community. When we read about history, we see how cultures meet and clash, or meet and blend. In the case of Chinese indentured laborers and African slaves, they met and intermarried, creating an entirely new culture, with unique religious, artistic, musical, and culinary traditions. I love what Holly says about empathy. There is nothing more essential in the role of a writer. I have to identify with my characters in one way or another. I’m neither Chinese nor a boy, but I identify with the hero of *Lion Island* by our shared love of words as a peaceful means to seek social justice. Of course, I still needed proofreading by many generous cultural and linguistic experts.

***A main character in Alex Sanchez’s young adult novel, The God Box (2007), asks, “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?” (p. 139)? Do any of your characters fight who they are? What do they learn? What might adolescent readers learn about themselves as they live this experience vicariously?***

**Margarita:** Teens feel hyphenated in various ways, not just culturally. They are perched in the air, on that gap between childhood and adulthood. Memoirs and stories can serve as bridges that are by nature peacemakers. (That's why bridges are always the first to be destroyed by invading armies.) Stories help us accept the various aspects of our world—and of ourselves. All we have to do is set one foot in front of the other and start traveling across the chasms between minds.

**Benjamin:** All of my characters are struggling to become themselves. Isn't that what adolescence is all about? Never mind adolescence; isn't that what all life is about?

It is not for nothing that Faulkner said that the only story worth telling was the struggle of the human heart against itself. I think a writer must write of painful things, of hard things. A writer, as Faulkner also said, must banish fear from his vocabulary. We have to be brave. And we have to take our young readers to some emotionally difficult places so that they can understand the possibilities of being a human being.

**Holly:** I think all of us fight “who we are” every day of our lives. That's part of just being human. But for me, the sooner we accept our own imperfections, the greater chance we have of living bigger, more satisfying, and meaningful lives.

In my novel *Counting By 7s* (2013), Willow Chance struggles not just with who she is, but how she's perceived. Those are two different but very connected things.

**Sharon:** Since I taught adolescents for over 20 years, I feel very comfortable with them. They've gone way ahead of me in their ability to master the newest tech trend, but the essence of what it means to be 15, for example, has not changed. They don't actually fight who they are, but they certainly question their identity, their purpose, their very essence. They are searching for that existential moment (even though most of them probably haven't the foggiest idea of what that term means!). ☺ They want to fit in. They want to stand out. They want to be noticed. They want to be ignored. They want to know everything. They want to know nothing.

They want to be loved. That's the character I like to start with. Then I dress him up with a life, a problem, a conflict, a sorry, a joy, and maybe even a fight. But his essence should scream out and connect with the young person who happens to pick up the book to read it.

**How have your unique experiences as a person influenced your work as a writer?**

**Holly:** I write contemporary, realistic fiction, so nearly everything I write about comes out of an experience I had, observed, heard about, or investigated. In the case of Willow Chance, this happened when my two sons attended a school for gifted children. I always start with the central character, and there is always some aspect of that person inside me.

I also love to make people laugh. I never had the courage to do stand-up comedy, but in college, my friends all wanted me to do it. I guess it's never too late.

**Margarita:** Because I'm both a botanist-agronomist and a poet, I love to interweave natural history with human history. I especially love tropical rain forest biology. If one teen sets down all those noisy gadgets long enough to gaze up at a tree, or walk across the street to get to know someone from a different background, I'll know my efforts to communicate with the future weren't wasted.

**Benjamin:** I am an ex-Catholic priest. I grew up on a farm in very humble circumstances. I spoke Spanish before I learned English (even though my grandparents were born in this country). I read a lot. I was married to a woman for 15 years. I was abused as a boy and finally came to terms with my sexuality in my early fifties. I love poetry and art and have studied those areas of my life. I studied in Europe for four years. I worked in a homeless shelter one summer in Kilburn (North London). I spent a summer in Tanzania. My intellectual field of study is contemporary American poetry. All of these experiences have directly contributed to who I am and how I think and feel about things. Even if I never write/wrote directly about any of these things, they have made me who I am as a person and who I am as a writer. I am all of the characters

I write. They are all sides of me, and they all live in my head. My head is a very busy place!

**Sharon:** The longer I live, the more I have experienced, the better writer I hope to be. I hope that my observations of life and loss and pain and joy can be transferred to my readers. I am not the same person I was when *Tears of a Tiger* was published in 1994. I have learned and laughed and loved. I have wept and wailed and screamed. Normal? Maybe. Maybe not. But I hope to transfer all that is me into a set of characters that makes a reader think and learn and embrace our common humanity.

**Margarita:** I love all the amazing details that I've learned about these other writers during this fascinating conversation! I'd like to end my small contribution by quoting Walter Dean Myers, who wrote in his how-to book, *Just Write* (2012): "I believe that your skills as a writer are not so much defined by intelligence or artistic ability as they are by how much of yourself you are willing to bring to the page. Be brave." I feel humbled and inspired by the intelligence, artistic ability, and remarkable courage of all my colleagues who have shared this discussion. It's a privilege to be included.

**Sharon M. Draper** is a professional educator, as well as an accomplished writer of over 30 award-winning books for adolescents and teachers, including *Copper Sun*, winner of the Coretta Scott King Award, the highly acclaimed *Jericho* and *Hazelwood* trilogies, and *Out of my Mind*, which remains on the New York Times bestseller list. She served as the National Teacher of the Year, has been honored at the White House six times, and was selected by the US State Department to be a literary ambassador to the children of Africa and China. In 2015, she was honored by the American Library Association as the recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime literary achievement. Her newest novel is *Stella* by Starlight.

**Margarita Engle** is the Cuban-American author of many verse novels, including a Newbery Honor book, *The Surrender Tree*; PEN USA Award winner, *The Lightning Dreamer*; and a memoir, the Walter Honor-winning *Enchanted Air*. Her books have also received multiple Pura

*Belpré*, *Américas*, and *Jane Addams* awards and honors. Books for younger children include the Charlotte Zolotow Award winner, *Drum Dream Girl*. Margarita's 2016 books are *Lion Island* (Atheneum) and *Morning Star Horse/El Caballo Lucero* (HBE Publishers). She lives in central California, where she enjoys helping her husband train his wilderness search and rescue dog. She can be reached at [margarita@margaritaengle.com](mailto:margarita@margaritaengle.com) or [www.margaritaengle.com](http://www.margaritaengle.com).

**Benjamin Alire Sáenz** is an author of poetry and prose for adults and teens. He is the winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award and the American Book Award for his books for adults. His young adult novel, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, was a Printz Honor Book, the Stonewall Award winner, the Pura Belpré Award winner, the Lambda Literary Award winner, and a finalist for the Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award. His first novel for teens, *Sammy and Juliana in Hollywood*, was an ALA Top Ten Book for Young Adults and a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. His latest novel for young adults, *The Inexplicable Logic of My Life*, will be published in Spring 2017 by Clarion Books. He teaches creative writing at the University of Texas, El Paso.

**Holly Goldberg Sloan** was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and spent her childhood living in Holland; Istanbul, Turkey; Washington DC; Berkeley, California; and Eugene, Oregon. After graduating from Wellesley College and spending some time as an advertising copywriter, she began writing and directing family feature films, including *Angels in the Outfield* and *Made in America*. Counting by 7s, her first middle-grade novel, was a New York Times Bestseller. Her other titles include *Appleblossom*, *the Possum*, *I'll Be There*, *Just Call My Name*, and the upcoming *Short*. The mother of two sons, Holly lives with her husband in Santa Monica, California.

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# Becoming Mockingjays:

Encouraging Student Activism through the Study of YA Dystopia

There is a pivotal moment early in *Mockingjay* (Collins, 2010), the final book in The Hunger Games trilogy, when the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, comes to fully appreciate her value as the Mockingjay, a symbol of resistance that gives hope to those who toil under the Capitol's oppression. Having accepted that performing this role will allow her to speak over the Capitol's oppressive policies and, in so doing, contribute to the betterment of her society, Katniss commits to what is, in effect, a political course of action when she declares, "I'm going to be the Mockingjay" (Collins, 2010, p. 31).

At a time when intolerance of all kinds—from racism to xenophobia to misogyny to classism to heterosexism—threatens the fabric of our democratic society, educators would do well to ask how they can support students in following Katniss's example. To this end, I have found young adult (YA) dystopia—a genre that participates in the project of social criticism (Booker, 1994) and that often (though not always) imagines adolescents as empowered figures capable of fighting oppression and transforming their society—a valuable teaching resource. YA dystopia is not without problems, however.

Some critics argue that works of dystopic fiction, such as Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010) and Roth's *Divergent* series (2011, 2012, 2013), articulate an ideology that privileges the individual at the expense of the social collective (see, for example, Morrison, 2014). Like other forms of young adult literature, dystopian novels for adolescents can also reify normalized expectations about race, class,

gender, sexual orientation, and so on, thereby marginalizing some readers. Even when a novel aspires to impart progressive ideologies, its paratext (Genette & Maclean, 1991)—the material beyond a story that allows people to recognize a book as a "book"—may impede its ability to do so, thus communicating conflicted messages to readers.

In this article, I advocate for engaging students in activist work that builds on the political themes expressed in YA dystopian fiction, a genre whose popularity has grown exponentially since *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) was first published and adapted for film. To begin, I argue that while works of YA dystopia appear to position protagonists as empowered figures capable of working for change, their paratext can circumvent that reading by imparting ideologies that marginalize, or even oppress, some readers. Next, I describe a critical inquiry assignment that required students in a college elective that I designed and taught on YA dystopian fiction to visit local bookstores with the goal of examining how dystopias for adolescents are packaged and marketed to readers. After investigating the books' paratext and identifying related social justice issues, the students then composed short notes in which they highlighted issues that concerned them. They then returned to the same bookstore and left their notes in copies of those titles with the goal of raising future readers' consciousness about those issues. By creating opportunities for students to use their literacy to speak over potentially oppressive ideologies, I argue that teachers can invite them to become Mockingjays—empowered agents

capable of using reading and writing to act on, and transform, the world.

## **Power, Agency, and Ideology in Young Adult Dystopia**

Trites (2000) identifies power as a defining characteristic of literature for adolescents. In much the same way that young adult fiction portrays adolescents interacting with social institutions that enable and repress them, Trites argues that young adult literature is itself an institution, one that is designed to teach adolescents their place within the social power structure. Because YA dystopias feature adolescent protagonists resisting authority and battling oppression, however, Trites's argument about teaching adolescents their place may not appear to apply at first glance. Ames (2013), for example, argues that in dystopian fiction for adolescents, it is "young people—willing or not—who must confront [their] fears and ultimately solve the problems that spawn them" (p. 6). In this sense, dystopian fiction for adolescents acknowledges teenagers' agency by portraying them as figures capable of working for change.

For Thomas (2014), power is a central concern of YA dystopian fiction. She regards the genre as offering readers "a kind of wish fulfillment; not as the life we wish to overcome, but as the power and influence we wish we could have" (para. 2). Like Hintz and Ostry (2003), who argue that YA dystopias appeal to adolescents' desire for "power and control" (p. 9), Thomas (2014) interprets the genre as a metaphor for adolescence. She notes that YA dystopias are often set in "worlds full of rules, where all choices are taken away" (para. 4). Moreover, she notes that these stories take place in societies that "dictate everything about the protagonists' lives, from what they eat and wear to who they marry, how many kids they have, and what careers they pursue" (para. 4). If these storyworlds are undesirable, however, "they can also be changed" (para. 3). Like Sambell (2004), Thomas (2014) argues that YA dystopias ultimately offer readers "hope that we will overcome the restrictions placed on us" (para. 7).

Campbell (2010) believes that dystopian fiction for adolescents invites readers to "look critically at the power structures that envelop and seek to construct them" (p. 2), though he cautions that the genre also

manipulates readers to accept particular ideologies. He consequently encourages educators to support students in reading dystopias critically with the goal of asking how they interpolate (or position) them as subjects. Hintz and Ostry (2003) also credit works of dystopian fiction for adolescents with inviting "people to view their society with a critical eye, sensitizing them or predisposing them to political action" (p. 7). As Thomas (2012) notes, however, these books also have the potential to communicate "dangerous messages and old-fashioned, bigoted stereotypes wrapped up in dystopian packaging" (para. 2). A theme that concerns all of the aforementioned critics has to do with the value of creating opportunities for students to examine dystopian fiction for adolescents critically. The genre might appear to acknowledge adolescents' agency, but individual novels can invite readers to accept potentially oppressive ideologies that marginalize some people.

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## **Attending to Paratext**

Attesting to the value of inviting students to read literature for adolescents critically, Hollindale (1988) distinguishes between a text's surface ideology, wherein an author's personal beliefs and values are communicated to readers through explicit ideological statements made by a narrator or character in a story (pp. 10–11), and passive ideology, which is communicated implicitly via an author's unexamined assumptions (p. 12). Writes Hollindale, "A large part of any book is written not by its author but by the world its author lives in" (p. 15). Amending Hollindale's assertion slightly, one might argue that a part of any book is written not by its author but by the multitude of people who contribute to its material production. Among others, this includes literary agents, who may encourage an author to modify her creative vision for the purpose of selling publishers on a book; editors who, in responding to an author's work, might ask her to revise (or rewrite) portions of a story; and the

people involved in designing and marketing a book for consumption by readers. In this article, I am interested in the how the latter group's contributions work to communicate passive ideologies to readers.

Genette and Maclean (1991) argue that a "text rarely appears in its naked state, without the reinforcement and accompaniment of a certain number of

productions, themselves verbal or not, like an author's name, a title, a preface, [and] illustrations" (p. 261). In making this argument, they direct attention to what literary critics refer to as paratext, "the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public" (p. 261). Simply put, the term paratext refers to any of the material, beyond a story, that allows readers to recognize a book as a "book." This includes (but is not limited to) an illustrated book cover, a title page, a plot synopsis on the rear jacket, an author biography, and blurbs from people who reviewed the book. Read-

ers may take a text's materiality for granted, but as Genette and Maclean note, a text (or narrative) is not easily divorced from its paratext. Quite the opposite, they propose that readers experience paratext as *part of* a text, which in turn shapes their interpretation of it. To demonstrate this point, Genette and Maclean ask a deceptively simple question: "[R]educed to its text alone and without the help of any instructions for use, how would we read Joyce's *Ulysses* if it were not called *Ulysses*?" (p. 262).

Morrell (2002) defines critical literacy "as the ability not only to read and write, but also to assess texts in order to understand the relationships between power and domination that underlie and inform those texts" (pp. 72–73). Messages about power and domination are not limited to the narratives readers en-

counter in books, however. As educators, we (like our students) might assume that a narrative "is the kernel of value and significance while the rest is merely a protective husk" (Yampbell, 2005, p. 348), but this assumption can blind us to the important role that paratext plays in shaping the ideological messages a work of literature imparts to readers. By inviting students to ask how YA dystopias (and other texts, for that matter) are packaged and marketed—that is, by encouraging them to attend critically to their paratext—teachers can support their understanding of how these books position them as subjects and how they reify ideologies that marginalize some people. Moreover, because close reading of the sort that I am proposing requires that students attend to multiple modes—for example, images, words, and colors—with the goal of understanding how they work together to convey meaning, it encourages them to participate in the multiliteracies that many writers argue are characteristic of 21st-century communication (e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996; Serafini, 2014).

In the section below, I describe a critical inquiry assignment that asked undergraduates taking an elective that I taught on the *The Hunger Games* trilogy and YA dystopian fiction to visit local bookstores with the goal of investigating how these books are packaged and marketed to readers. By encouraging students to adopt a critical stance and attend closely to the paratext that surrounds works of dystopian fiction for adolescents, the assignment challenged them to explain how paratext can reveal assumptions that publishers hold about the audience that reads these books.

## Random Acts of Revolution: A Critical Inquiry Assignment

Located in the mid-South, the university where I work is attended by predominantly White students. Many (though by no means all) of the students that I teach come from what I would describe as conservative backgrounds, and it is not uncommon for them to experience feelings of tension when they participate in class discussions and activities that call the social and economic privilege they enjoy as members of the dominant culture into question. As a critical educator, I am interested in understanding how I can create space in my classroom for students who occupy posi-

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**By encouraging students to adopt a critical stance and attend closely to the paratext that surrounds works of dystopian fiction for adolescents, the assignment challenged them to explain how paratext can reveal assumptions that publishers hold about the audience that reads these books.**

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tions of power “to dialogue about how their power positions affect other people” and “how their lives and actions, even if unconsciously, oppress others” (Kuby, 2013, p. 19). Like Kuby, this has led me to grapple with a series of difficult questions, including:

How do we help students . . . of privilege understand systematic oppression? How do we help students respond to or possibly overcome entitlement thinking? How do we help students not feel guilty, but use their new understandings about oppression to fuel activism and justice for others? (Kuby, 2013, p. 20)

The critical inquiry assignment described in this article grew out of my own ongoing efforts to answer these questions for myself and to design meaningful instruction that encourages the students I work with to use their reading and writing in the service of working for social justice.

The “Random Acts of Revolution” assignment required students in an undergraduate elective, “The Hunger Games and Young Adult Dystopian Fiction,” to investigate the paratext (Genette & Maclean, 1991) that surrounds dystopian fiction for adolescents with the goal of answering the following inquiry questions: “What conclusions can we draw about how YA dystopias are packaged and marketed to adolescents, and what social justice issues does this raise?” To complete the assignment, the students (all of whom were White and most of whom came from middle-class backgrounds) were instructed to visit a local bookseller (for example, Barnes and Noble, Target, Walmart, as well as independent bookstores) and devote time to examining the visual and verbal rhetoric of YA dystopian book covers with the goal of understanding: 1) how the genre (defined broadly to include science fiction and post-apocalyptic fiction) is packaged; 2) what audience(s), as evidenced by its paratext, the genre is marketed to; and 3) what assumptions about race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so on these books’ paratext suggests publishers make about the audience reading dystopian fiction for adolescents. In the end, the vast majority of the students chose to visit chain rather than locally owned bookstores for a pragmatic reason: the YA dystopia section in corporate bookstores like Barnes and Noble and Target tend to include a greater number of titles to examine. That said, teachers could just as easily invite students to visit public or school libraries, an issue that I address later in this article.

To frame the students’ investigation of the paratext that surrounds YA dystopian fiction, I highlighted a series of questions for them to consider. In doing so, I sought to avoid calling their attention to specific social justice issues, though the questions I encouraged them to reflect on admittedly steered them to think about how constructs such as race, gender, sexual orientation, adolescence, and so on are implicated in the design and marketing of these texts. Still, by leaving the questions open-ended, my expectation was that students would draw their own conclusions about how the paratext surrounding dystopian fiction for adolescents can normalize social expectations about these constructs (see Fig. 1). As they conducted their observations, I encouraged the students to document titles of books that exemplified the social justice issues their investigation led them to identify. Later, when they presented their findings and reflected on their implications in a formal written paper, the students

- What do the covers of YA dystopias seem to emphasize, and how does their design work to accomplish this?
- What patterns (or commonalities) do you recognize when people (or parts of people) appear on the covers of YA dystopias? Who is represented? Who is absent?
- Based on the covers you examine, what can you infer about how publishers market YA dystopias to female readers? Male readers? Mixed-gender audiences? What specific evidence in the paratext of the books you examine allows you to make these fine-grained distinctions?
- What assumptions about gender, race, class, and/or sexuality do the covers you examine communicate, and how do they reinforce or subvert normalized expectations about these constructs?
- What do publishers emphasize in the plot synopses offered on the back cover of YA dystopias? Having read a sufficient number of synopses, what generalizations can you draw about the characters in these books? What qualities do they share?
- Based on the book covers you examine, what assumptions do publishers seem to make about adolescents? In making these assumptions, what groups of adolescents do they overlook or ignore?
- Based on your investigation, how do YA dystopias reinforce normalized expectations about adolescence/ts?

Figure 1. Questions to guide critical inquiry assignment

embedded images of book covers in their paper with the goal of illustrating their analyses.

Booker (1994) argues that “[t]he modern turn to dystopian fiction is largely attributable to perceived inadequacies in existing social and political systems” (p. 20). Similarly, Trites (2014) notes that dystopian fiction has historically been popular with readers during periods of political and economic instability (p. 26). As Simmons (2012) demonstrates, educators can capitalize on the popularity of YA dystopian fiction and use it as a foundation to tap into and build on the concerns that many adolescents already have about social justice issues. With that in mind, the second phase of the critical inquiry assignment invited students to “become Mockingjays” by using their literacy to speak back to problematic ideologies that their investigation of the paratext surrounding YA dystopian novels led them to recognize.

Having written a formal paper in which they examined three social justice issues that their analysis of YA dystopias led them to identify, the students next composed short notes in which they each highlighted a single social justice issue that troubled them. To do so, they used specially made notecards emblazoned with the image of a hand with three fingers raised,



Figure 2. Notecard graphic

a gesture that in the context of Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy is understood to signify resistance to oppression. Beneath the image, which graduate student Logan Hilliard designed and painted, was an appeal encouraging readers to “Join the Resistance” (see Fig. 2). Having written their notes, the students then returned to the booksellers where they conducted their initial observations and took photographs of their notes alongside YA dystopias whose covers illustrated the social justice issues they addressed. To encourage their activism, the students were given the option to leave their notes inside books for future readers in order to raise those readers’ consciousness about the issues, something they all elected to do (see Fig. 3). Self-reports the students shared in class upon completing the assignment suggested that these “random acts of revolution” led them to experience a sense of empowerment, an implication that I discuss later in this article.

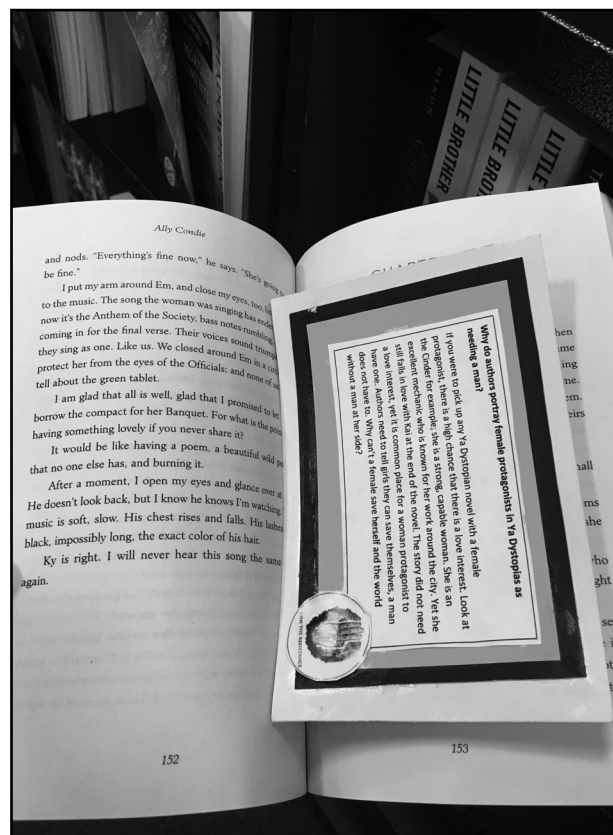


Figure 3. Consciousness-raising activity

## Recurring Themes in the Critical Inquiry Assignment

Below, I examine three social justice issues that a thematic analysis of the students' papers and notecards suggested they discussed most frequently. Though not the only issues addressed, these issues tended to receive attention across the majority of the papers I read. As will be seen, the students interpreted the paratext associated with the YA dystopian novels they examined as marginalizing some readers by reinforcing normalized expectations about race, sexual orientation, and gender. In each instance, I include images of the notecards they left in books for future readers in their effort to raise readers' consciousness.

### Whiteness and Young Adult Dystopias

Not all of the YA dystopias that students examined depicted people on their covers. A number of books showcased gloomy dystopian settings, as well as objects and figures that took on symbolic relevance in the context of a story. By refraining from depicting people on their covers, the students speculated that publishers may have intended for these books to target a crossover audience comprised of females as well as males, and adults as well as adolescents. When people, or parts of people (for example, a foot, arm, or head) did appear on the covers of YA dystopias, however, the students noted that they were most often female and almost exclusively White (see Fig. 4).

Discussing this finding, Genevieve (real first names used with permission) explained that of the 38 book covers she examined, "36 depicted a White person, two depicted a Black person, and only one showed a Hispanic person." Troubled by this, she wondered why publishers neglected to give teenagers from other racial and ethnic backgrounds opportunities to see people like themselves represented on the covers of YA dystopias (or other books marketed to adolescents). In her paper, Genevieve asked, "Why does this happen? Is it just coincidence that these authors are all writing about White adolescents? Can these characters only be White to properly fill their role in the storyline?" Rejecting the latter pos-

sibility, she concluded that the preponderance of White people on the covers of books, whether intentional or not, normalizes the idea that one race is superior to others. Presenting the problem in even stronger language, Marina called for covers that acknowledge "the broad range of youth and adults that read these books," as opposed to reinforcing an ideology of "White privilege and superiority." Stating her belief that a work of literature "can change a person's life," she wondered why publishers don't make more of an effort to market books to adolescents from other racial and cultural backgrounds.

In a class discussion that took place after the students had completed the critical inquiry assignment,

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**With that in mind, the second phase of the critical inquiry assignment invited students to "become Mockingjays" by using their literacy to speak back to problematic ideologies that their investigation of the paratext surrounding YA dystopian novels led them to recognize.**

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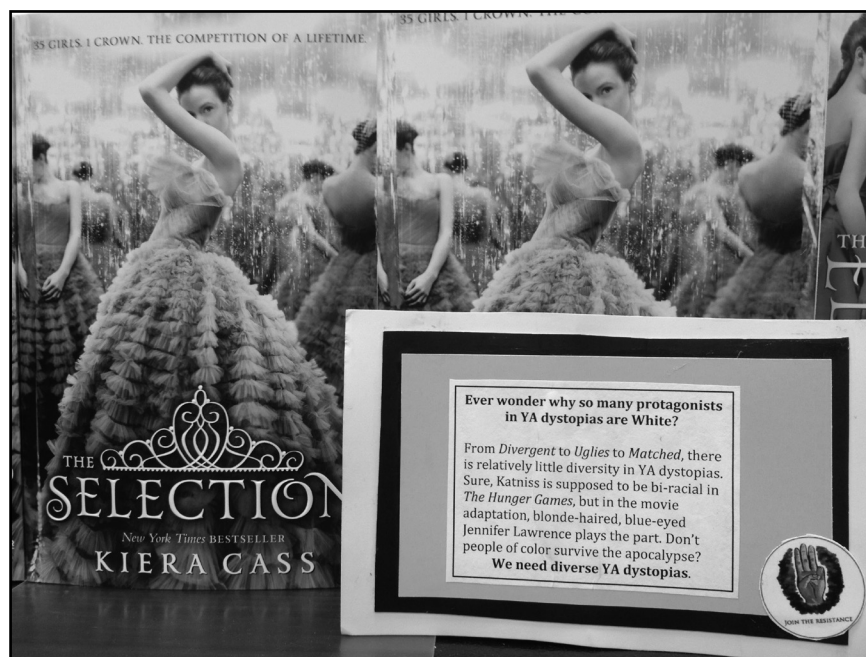


Figure 4. Whiteness in YA dystopias

everyone expressed their surprise at the frequency with which White people appeared on the covers of YA dystopias and other books marketed to adolescents. Moreover, they explained that even when a protagonist in a novel was described as biracial, the representation of that character on the cover suggested otherwise. As a case in point, they described the movie tie-in cover for Collins's (2013) *Catching Fire*. Though Collins herself describes Katniss as having olive skin and dark eyes, the book cover features a recognizably White Jennifer Lawrence in the role, even though her hair and eye color were altered to suggest otherwise. When people of color did appear on the cover of a book, students noted that they seldom occupied as prominent a position as their White counterparts, leading Joseph to speculate that perhaps publishers meant to downplay race in these instances.

Asked why they thought they hadn't noticed this prior to completing the inquiry assignment, one student, Macie, cited the problem of White privilege. "We're so accustomed to seeing people like ourselves represented in the media," she explained, "that it comes to seem natural. We become blind to the problem, and so we don't even think to question why people from other races aren't depicted more often on book covers." Macie's comments call to mind

Banfield's assertion that "in a racist society children's trade books and textbooks must be viewed as one of the most effective tools of oppression" (quoted in Schieble, 2012, p. 212). In this way, her claims point to the value of creating opportunities for students to view otherwise taken-for-granted material—in this case, book covers—through fresh eyes.

### Heteronormativity and Young Adult Dystopias

A second theme that students identified during the critical inquiry assignment addressed the role of dystopian novels' paratext in normalizing heterosexual relationships. A number of scholars and social media bloggers have commented on the pervasiveness of the romance trope in dystopian fiction for adolescents (see, for example, Scholes & Ostenson, 2013; Vail, 2013), including Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy, which famously positions Katniss as an object of desire for both Peeta and Gale. As the students discovered, however, these relationships invariably featured heterosexual characters. Commenting on this, Macie argued, "The existence of heterosexual individuals in YA dystopias is not the problem per se; the absence of any other sexuality is the problem."

To demonstrate how the paratext accompanying YA dystopian fiction can reify heteronormativity, students again focused on these books' illustrated covers. Several students noted that when a female and male appeared together on the covers of YA dystopias, they were often positioned in ways that hinted at the possibility of a romantic relationship. Macie, for example, described covers on which characters "reached out to each other against a background of a dazzling galaxy of stars," or stared longingly at each other. She concluded that these "picturesque images romanticize the very idea of teen romance and normalize the relationship as something primarily between a female and male."

Describing plot synopses offered on the rear cover of dust jackets, the students recognized that publishers also use language in ways that reinforce the assumption that heterosexual relationships are the norm. Jamie, for example, noted that several of the book covers she examined

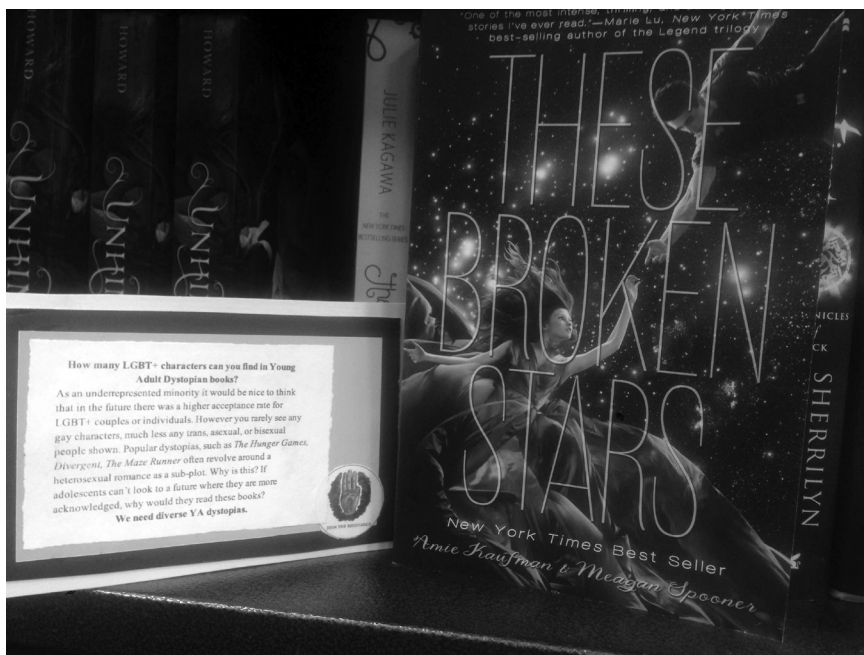


Figure 5. Heteronormativity in YA dystopias

described “a heterosexual couple fighting to save the world,” and she wondered how LGBTQ teenagers browsing for books were likely to experience this. Likewise, Rebecca concluded that, much as they do by privileging Whiteness, publishers marginalize a sizeable number of readers, in this case “all but leaving out the LGBTQ community” (see Fig. 5).

As their comments suggest, a number of students expressed their concerns about the role that YA dystopian fiction potentially plays in marginalizing teenagers who don’t identify as heterosexual. Foregrounding the “broad range of queer identities” that are available to people, Macie wrote, “It seems as though in dystopian books, which are most commonly set in the distant future, sexuality would not be the issue that it is today, and therefore [dystopian books] present the perfect platform to validate the existence of other sexualities.” Noting that this is seldom the case, however, she decided that “these books exist in the service of bolstering the notion of heteronormativity.” She wondered, “If LGBT teenagers look to a future where their identities are still not unquestioningly accepted, and if they have no basis to infer that they ever will be, then what do they have to look forward to?”

### **Problematic Representations of Girls in Young Adult Dystopias**

It is not uncommon for scholars who write about dystopian fiction for adolescents to celebrate these books’ portrayal of so-called “strong girls.” Fritz (2014), for example, argues that contemporary YA dystopian novels such as Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010), Westerfeld’s *Uglies* series (2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007), and Young’s *Dust Lands* trilogy (2011, 2012, 2014) draw on discourses of “girl power” and “girl activism” to construct empowered “female protagonists [who] are catapulted to the center of their societies’ attention because they dare to test their boundaries by fighting against the laws and norms of their deeply flawed worlds” (p. 18). As a result of investigating the paratext that surrounds YA dystopias, however, students in my class concluded that, in many instances, it works to counteract the latter reading.

All of the students commented on the frequency with which females appear on the covers of YA dystopias, leading them to speculate that publishers regard girls as the primary audience for these books.

Although Elena found that female protagonists are not always sexualized on book covers, she nonetheless argued that images of them often “conform to idealized standards of beauty.” Moreover, she noted that publishers, through their use of language in plot synopses, often position female protagonists as passive. Elena explained that while many of the YA dystopias she exam-

ined purported to present “strong female characters,” their paratext more often than not positioned those characters as dependent on males. She was “alarmed,” for example, to encounter the following statements on the back covers of books she examined: “A boy with a secret of his own offers Jin the only chance she has . . .” (Graudin, 2015, *The Walled City*); “All that changes when she encounters a beautiful boy . . . with a secretive past” (Lyga et al., 2015, *After the Red Rain*); and “he promised to keep them both safe” (Young, 2013, *The Program*).

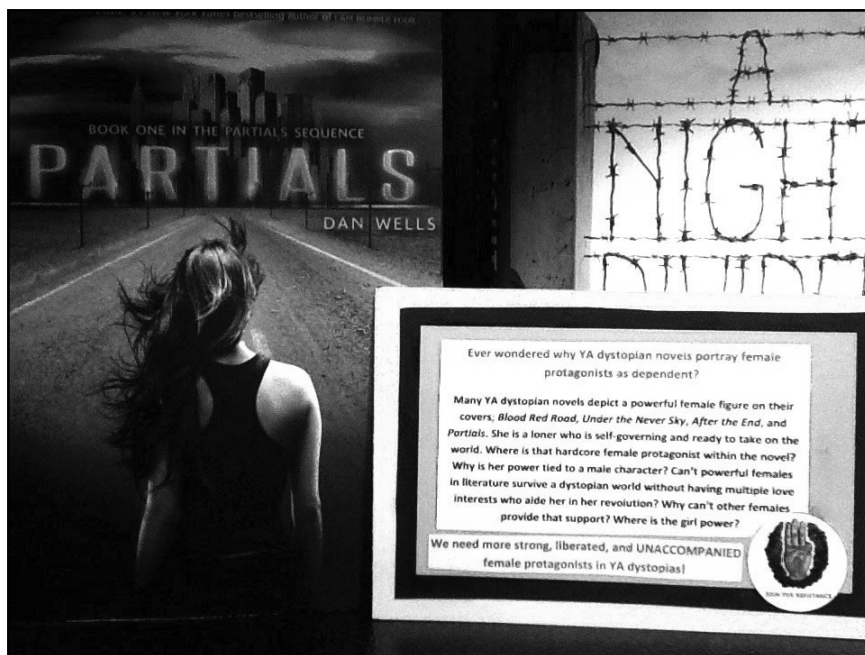
Her analysis led her to conclude that while YA dystopias “are making progress by depicting girls as powerful figures, there is still a normalized standard that a girl must have a male figure to either love or let lead her, even if she is the ‘leading lady.’”

Like Elena, Chelsea was also surprised to discover that, though many YA dystopias feature a lone, powerful-looking female on their front covers, the plot synopses that await readers—and in some cases, the illustrated covers of future installments in a series—emphasize her desirability to a male. Though she regarded YA dystopian novels as aspiring to represent adolescence as an “empowering time . . . when young adults discover their agency,” Chelsea ultimately concluded that, in the case of female protagonists, a second ideological statement, conveyed implicitly through a book’s paratext, counteracted that message by suggesting that girls gain worth as a result of their desirability to males. This led her to conclude that by

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**[The student’s] analysis led her to conclude that while YA dystopias “are making progress by depicting girls as powerful figures, there is still a normalized standard that a girl must have a male figure to either love or let lead her, even if she is the ‘leading lady.’”**

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**Figure 6.** Representations of females in YA dystopias

“assuming that romance will appeal more to female readers than female empowerment,” publishers marginalize girls like herself who would prefer to “read about a singular, influential female character.” In the closing sentence of the note she left for a future reader in a copy of a YA dystopian novel (see Fig. 6), Chelsea argued, “We need more strong, liberated, and UNACCOMPANIED female protagonists in YA dystopias!”

## Conclusion

We are arguably experiencing the Golden Age of young adult literature in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Today, teachers and students have access to a host of well-written dystopian novels for adolescents that explore complex social and political issues in thoughtful ways. At the same time, as Thomas (2012) observes, there are also young adult dystopias that perpetuate oppressive ideologies and outdated stereotypes. While emphasis is understandably placed on reading narratives critically in school, a book’s paratext can also communicate problematic messages about race, sexual orientation, gender, and so on. When readers take a book’s materiality for granted, they neglect to consider how features, such

as book covers, plot synopses, and reviewer blurbs, interpolate them as subjects, making the dissemination of these messages all the more problematic and all the more insidious.

Much has been written about the pedagogical value of creating space for students to read YA literature from a critical perspective. Inviting students to critically examine the paratext surrounding YA dystopian fiction, or any other genre of YA literature, is an equally profitable exercise. The students in my class were troubled by the oppressive messages about race, sexual orientation, and gender they encountered in the paratext of the dystopian novels they

examined. Notably, the knowledge that these issues escaped their notice prior to completion of the critical inquiry assignment bothered many of them. As Rebecca, describing her experience with the assignment, wrote, “I had never really paid much attention to the covers of books, for whatever reason. After spending an afternoon staring at the book covers of YA dystopias, though, I think . . . it’s sad and irritating that one of the most popular forms of fiction, especially for young adults, alienates and marginalizes so many readers.”

Although the majority of the students in my class chose to conduct their analyses of YA dystopias at corporate bookstores like Barnes and Noble and Walmart, the assignment described in this article is not limited to those settings. Rather, as one reviewer noted in response to an early draft of this paper, the assignment could just as easily ask students to examine YA dystopias in public or school libraries. The point of leaving notes in books for future readers is, after all, not to dissuade them from purchasing a book (something that I suspect most teachers, myself included, would be loathe to do). Rather, it represents a consciousness-raising activity designed to heighten people’s awareness of social issues that they might not otherwise have considered. In the event that students were to discover that the books in their school libraries failed

to satisfactorily reflect the diversity of their schools, they could petition school leaders to rectify the issue or work with the school librarian to recommend titles they would like to see ordered and shelved. Activities of this sort create additional opportunities for students to become Mockingjays by positioning them to work for change in their communities.

In the context of Collins's trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010), the image of the Mockingjay is a powerful symbol, one that ultimately inspires a political revolution that topples a totalitarian government. To be clear, leaving notes in books for other readers does little (if anything) to address the institutional and structural inequities that produce and sustain problems such as racism, poverty, gender inequality, and so on. It does, however, create the conditions necessary for students to use reading and writing to engage in political work, and in so doing, to see themselves as agents capable of fighting for a more just, more equitable world.

Teachers could build on the activity described in this article by involving students in writing letters to their local newspapers to address issues that affect their communities or by working with them to organize and advertise food and clothing drives designed to support people experiencing poverty. An assignment that I introduced later in the same course required students to read an additional YA dystopian novel beyond those they read for class with the goal of identifying a social justice issue it addressed. After doing so, they researched that issue to deepen their understanding of how it impacts people in the world beyond the text. Each student then produced a short video essay that included a brief introduction to the novel and highlighted the social justice issue addressed, after which they shared research findings concerning how the issue impacts people in the real world. To conclude, the students called on their audience to become Mockingjays and highlighted a series of manageable steps people could take to combat the social justice issues they addressed in their video essays. In addition to screening the students' video essays in class, I published them online in order to share their work with a larger audience.

Describing the benefits of capitalizing on YA dystopian fiction's potential to promote student activism, Simmons (2012) argues that "social-action projects require students to take their learning into the community to benefit the greater good through the use of

their learned skills" (p. 25). Similarly, Morrell (2002) argues that students are "[m]otivated and empowered by the prospect of addressing a real problem in their community" (p. 76). Crucial to the success of the critical inquiry assignment described in this article was the opportunity it afforded students to use their literacy to engage in social action. A number of students described the enjoyment they found in completing the assignment, noting that it allowed them to exercise their voices, something they felt they were unaccustomed to in school (a disturbing comment) and that they experienced as empowering. They were especially enthusiastic about the prospect of other people reading the notes they left in books at the different booksellers, and they were curious to know how their audience responded to the issues they raised.

"Even if it makes them angry," Chelsea remarked, "at least we helped bring these issues to people's attention."

From a teacher's perspective, a rewarding aspect of this assignment was that it opened students' eyes to social justice issues many had not previously considered. When they spoke about their findings in class, for example, several students did so with a tone of genuine conviction. I attribute this to the fact that the inquiry assignment encouraged them to discover these issues for themselves. As a result, any tensions they might have experienced had I called their attention to these issues was mitigated by their involvement in the assignment. To learn something for oneself is, it seems, a powerful thing. That said, it is also important that teachers create opportunities for students to process the social justice issues they explore by talking about them with others in the context of class discussions. Race, sexual orientation, and gender are complex issues, and they warrant careful examination. Throughout our time together, my students and I continually asked how issues like those discussed in this article were implicated in the novels we read. This experience led me to conclude that the opportunity

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**Crucial to the success of the critical inquiry assignment described in this article was the opportunity it afforded students to use their literacy to engage in social action.**

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to hear opposing viewpoints, both expressed in class discussions and read during our carefully selected course readings, complicated students' understanding of these issues.

The Mockingjay metaphor that I have worked with in this paper is not without limitations. For example, in positioning Katniss as the Mockingjay, the

adults in Collins's trilogy essentially treat her as a pawn in a larger political game, something that we would not want for our students. Still, the opportunity to teach a course that focused explicitly on Collins's trilogy led me to appreciate the extent to which many young people look up to the character of Katniss as a source of inspiration. Several of the students in my class recalled reading The Hunger Games series and aspiring to emulate Katniss by standing up to injustices they encountered. Others recalled sharing the books with younger siblings in

hopes that they would be motivated to do the same. As teachers, we can tap into the passion and enthusiasm that many students feel for characters like Katniss and use them as a basis for helping students appreciate the fact that they have a voice and are capable of speaking out against injustice.

Arguing for the important role that young adult literature can play in social justice education, Glasgow (2001) wrote:

In an increasingly abrasive and polarized American society, social justice education has the potential to prepare citizens who are sophisticated in their understanding of diversity and group interaction, able to critically evaluate social institutions, and committed to working democratically with diverse others. (p. 54)

Written more than a decade ago, Glasgow's characterization of American society as "abrasive" and "polarized" almost seems quaint by today's standards.

If schools are, as John Dewey (1916/2005) argued, crucial to the preservation of a democratic society, then it is imperative that educators engage students in thinking about how texts position them as subjects and how they invite them to view others. This is not enough, however. As educators, we must also create opportunities for students to use their literacy to act on the world.

Writes Wolk (2009), "No longer is the curriculum simply the novel or the facts to be learned but, rather, the students and their teacher together using books, other authentic resources, and their own opinions and experiences to create the 'living curriculum' as a true community of learners" (p. 666). When we approach the teaching of literature in this way, designing instruction that encourages students to interact with books that they are excited and passionate about and creating opportunities for them to participate in inquiry assignments that are designed to foster civic engagement, we prepare them (should they so choose) to become Mockingays, people capable of speaking out against oppression in its myriad forms and willing to work in support of equity and justice for all people. In doing so, perhaps they will create a world in which the odds are in all people's favor.

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# “The Tricky Reverse Narration That Impels Our Entwined Stories”:

Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and Queer Temporalities

In 2006, longtime lesbian cartoonist Alison Bechdel released her graphic memoir, *Fun Home*. The nonfiction text chronicles her experiences growing up in rural Pennsylvania, her gradual awareness about her homosexuality, and her relationship with her siblings and parents, especially her enigmatic father.

Given this subject matter, *Fun Home* has a strong appeal to adolescent readers. Even though the graphic memoir was not written with this audience in mind, it addresses an array of issues that young people face. As one commentator said of the narrative, *Fun Home* “is similar to several young adult literature novels because the navigation through different spheres of identity and the ultimate end goal of claiming one’s autonomy are quintessential themes” (“Alison Bechdel,” 2014, para. 6).

In the years since its release, *Fun Home* has become popular with teens in general and queer and questioning youth in particular. While the graphic memoir has not yet been incorporated into the curriculum of many public high schools, it has been chosen as the common reading for first-year students at a variety of colleges and universities. At institutions such the College of Charleston and, most recently, Duke University, the book has been seen as relevant for young people who are in their late teens. A variety of cultural commentators have agreed. Susan E. Kirtley (2012), in a book exploring gender in American comics, identified Bechdel’s book as one of the most poignant portraits of girlhood to date (p. 11). Like-

wise, Jessica Grose (2014), in an article that appeared in *Elle* magazine, included *Fun Home* on her list of the top-ten books “about teenage girls and growing up” (para. 3). And Emily Temple (2015), in an essay that was posted on the popular media commentary site *Flavorwire*, deemed *Fun Home* among “the best coming of age books for girls” (para. 1).

Analogous assessments about Bechdel’s text have been made by industry insiders. In 2014, *Booklist* codified *Fun Home*’s status as a popular book among YA audiences when it included the graphic memoir in its compendium of the Best Young Adult Books released since 2000 (Olson, 2014, p. 98). In November 2015, the National Council of Teachers of English gave further credence to this designation when it included Bechdel as one of the featured authors at its annual convention (p. 48). Taken collectively, these examples affirm that *Fun Home* not only could, but should, be approached as a text for adolescent readers rather than simply a queer text composed for adult audiences.

Given the way in which *Fun Home* spotlights growing up and coming of age, it is not surprising that the graphic memoir offers a multifaceted meditation on the passage of time. In recounting the story of her “family tragicomic,” as she calls it, Bechdel features an array of events over the course of her life and in the lives of her mother and father. These include her parents’ courtship and the early years of their marriage; the first time that she got her menstrual period;

her experience of coming out to her family in college; and—in the mystery that forms the heart of the book—her father’s elusive sexuality and his death by possible suicide.

That said, *Fun Home* does not address these events in a chronological or linear way. As Rob Spillman (2014) has commented, “[T]he memoir loops and spirals through time” (para. 2). The narrative opens with Alison as an elementary-aged youngster playing a game of “airplane” with her father on the floor of the living room (Bechdel, 2006, p. 3). While the chapter goes on to provide an overview of her father’s life—his passion for restoring old homes, his dictatorial parenting style, and his complicated and deeply closeted sexuality—the bulk of the chapter presents Alison as a prepubescent girl. We get a summary of Bruce Bechdel’s life, but the visual representation of Alison throughout these pages suggests that she does not age during this discussion. Instead, based on physical indicators such as her height, weight, and facial structure, she remains frozen in time.

The second chapter of *Fun Home*, however, does not pick up chronologically where the opening one leaves off. Instead, it leaps ahead roughly a decade to the death of Alison’s father when she was 19 years old (Bechdel, 2006, p. 27). This temporal marker, though, is far from fixed. Within the span not simply of a few pages but of a few panels, Alison takes the reader on an adventure through time. First, she scrolls back to her father’s boyhood in Pennsylvania during the late 1930s (p. 30), and then she jumps ahead to his service in the Army amidst the Vietnam War (p. 32). The chapter closes at a point even further ahead in time than when it began, with the cartoonist as an adult visiting her father’s grave years after his death (p. 53).

All of the remaining chapters of *Fun Home* operate along analogous lines of temporal unpredictability. Both between sections, and frequently within them, the text jumps around in time. Many of the titles that Bechdel chose for her chapters announce, or at least signal, these shifts. Chapter One is called “Old Father, Old Artificer,” Chapter Four is titled “In the Shadow of Young Girls,” and Chapter Five is dubbed “The Canary-Colored Caravan of Death.” While most of these monikers are taken from her father’s favorite books, they also signal her narrative’s interest in exploring the meaning and significance of temporality. Indeed, some of the ontological questions around

which *Fun Home* pivots include the following: *How does the past influence the present? In order to make sense of a current situation, must we always examine the events that preceded it? Is it possible for the present to be a clarifying lens on the past, rather than the other way around, as is commonly assumed?*

This essay makes the case that the treatment of time in *Fun Home* is far from an incidental or even idiosyncratic facet of the text; instead, it embodies an important and underexplored method for viewing, discussing, and understanding the graphic memoir. The construction of chronology in the 2006 narrative places it in dialogue with what has come to be known as queer temporalities.<sup>1</sup> Since LGBTQ relationships have historically existed outside of the typical progression narrative embodied in paradigmatic examples of heterosexual romance—first courtship, then marriage, then procreation—they can be connected with nonlinearity. For example, the still-popular slogan “I Can’t Even Think Straight!” that adorned t-shirts in the LGBTQ community throughout the 1990s compels us to contemplate the ways in which nonlinear storytelling is a queer act—and *vice versa*.

Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* offers an extended meditation on queer temporalities. In a powerful indication both of how the cartoonist’s nonheteronormative identity is imbricated with that of her father and of the centrality that time plays in this relationship, Bechdel closes the book with an observation about “the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories” (Bechdel, 2006, p. 232.2). By resisting or even rejecting conventional chronology, time itself in *Fun Home* can be seen as queered. Understanding how Bechdel’s graphic memoir engages with queer temporalities complicates the text’s representation of coming of age as well as coming out.

At the same time, these details yield new critical insights about and, by extension, new pedagogical approaches to a narrative that young adults are reading, both inside and outside of classroom settings. Exploring how *Fun Home* offers an alternative presentation of chronology and teleology also places the book in

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**By resisting or even rejecting conventional chronology, time itself in *Fun Home* can be seen as queered.**

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dialogue with contemporaneous LGBTQ events, such as the It Gets Better Project and the recent Supreme Court ruling legalizing same-sex marriage. Finally, but far from insignificantly, mapping the way in which queer temporalities operate in *Fun Home* offers a useful demonstration for how teachers can bridge the gap between seemingly abstract concepts in queer theory and concrete discussions in their own classroom practices.

### **Time/Out: Heteronormativity, Chrononormativity, and Queer Temporalities**

As Sam McBean (2013) has rightly noted, “Temporality and the affective register of historical inquiry have been important to queer theory from the start” (p. 124). Back in 1993, for example, Judith Butler called

attention to the “temporality of the term” queer in her book *Bodies That Matter* (p. 223). In a discussion about how the meaning of this word has shifted over the decades, she pointed out that “queer” is by no means a temporally stable concept. Instead, it is a “point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings” (Butler, 1993, p. 228).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993), in her influential study *Tendencies* released the same year, likewise discussed queer in relation to temporality. She called the concept “immemorial current . . . relational and strange” (Sedgwick, 1993, p. xii). To be “immemorial” is to defy a point of origin and be beyond

memory. In this way, to be queer was, for Sedgwick, to be both figuratively and literally “out of time” (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 9).

While queer theory has always had a strong connection to temporality, the opening decade of the new millennium saw the field take what Elizabeth Freeman (2007) has rightly called a “turn toward time” (p. 117). An array of books—ranging from Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2004), Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), and Carla Freccero’s *Queer/Early/Modern* (2006) to Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward* (2007), José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), and Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010)—examined not simply how queer might be understood in relation to time, but the relationship that queer itself has to temporality.

As these studies all pointed out, conceptions of time in Western culture have long been regarded as both linear and teleological. The chronology of an individual’s life is expected to follow a certain ineluctable order, namely “the conventional forward-moving narratives of birth, marriage, reproduction and death” (Halberstam, 2003, p. 314). This pathway, however, is predicated on heterocentric understandings of the human life cycle. As Jodie Taylor (2010) explains, “Dominant heteronormative temporalities operate under the assumption that a life course is (or should respectably be) conducted in a linear, sequential progression—that is, birth, childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, marriage, reproduction, child rearing, retirement, old age, death and kinship inheritance” (p. 894). Elizabeth Freeman (2010) has called this prevailing conception of time “chrononormativity” (p. 3). As she discusses, this concept signals “a mode of implantation through which institutional forces”—namely, the societal expectation that the proper, appropriate, and even natural life trajectory is to marry and have children—“come to seem like somatic facts” (Freeman, 2010, p. 3).

The LGBTQ community has historically been excluded from following this temporal pathway. For generations, gay men and lesbians were legally forbidden from marrying, biologically unable to procreate on their own, and bureaucratically prevented from adopting. Thus, queer individuals existed not merely outside of heteronormativity but outside of the chrononormativity that arose from it. In the years before events such as the Supreme Court ruling legalizing same-sex marriage, their lives did not—and for reasons that emanated from sources both *de facto* and

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**For generations, gay men and lesbians were legally forbidden from marrying, biologically unable to procreate on their own, and bureaucratically prevented from adopting. Thus, queer individuals existed not merely outside of heteronormativity but outside of the chrononormativity that arose from it.**

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*de jure* could not—adhere to the expected temporal order.

Queer temporalities recognize the unique relationship that LGBTQ individuals have with time, as nonlinear, nonteleological, and even asynchronous. “Queer time,” Halberstam (2005) asserts, is “about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing” (p. 2). It signifies an “existence outside of the heterocentric chrononormative time” (Mulvaney, 2013, p. 159). In the words of Freeman, queer temporalities represent “forms of interruption,” as well as “points of resistance to this temporal order, that, in turn, propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others” (2010, p. xxii). In this way, queer temporalities embody “a way of being in the world and a critique of the careful social scripts that usher even the most queer among us through major markers of individual development and into normativity” (Halberstam, 2007, p. 182).

### **Asynchronicity, Nonlinearity, and Reverse Chronology in *Fun Home***

In *Fun Home*, Bruce Bechdel ostensibly conforms both to heteronormativity and to the chrononormativity with which it is associated. On the surface, the life of the cartoonist’s father has followed the expected temporal progression: he grew up, got married, and had children. Indeed, as Bechdel remarks in the opening chapter about her dad, “He appeared to be an ideal husband and father” (2006, p. 17.1).

As readers quickly learn, however, both the trajectory of Bruce Bechdel’s life and his relationship with temporality is neither this simplistic nor this straightforward. Far from experiencing time in a linear and teleological manner, Bruce’s story is marked by twists, turns, loops, interruptions, stoppages, double-backs, and delays. First and foremost, his passion for architecture in general and for restoring old homes in particular connects him with a different temporal era. As Bechdel relays, “My father liked to imagine himself as a nineteenth-century aristocrat overseeing his estate from behind the leather-topped mahogany and brass Second-Empire desk” (2006, p. 60.1).

At repeated points throughout the graphic memoir, Bechdel calls attention to the fact that while she and the rest of her family lived in the contemporane-

ous moment of the Vietnam War era—with its peace signs, bell bottoms, and bean bag chairs—her father preferred to inhabit a different and far earlier period. In the opening chapter, Bechdel recounts how the gothic style home in which she grew up was built in 1867 (2006, p. 8.1) and how, over the course of the next 18 years, her father “restore[d] the house to its original condition, and then some” (p. 9.3). In many ways, in fact, he tried to transport himself back to this era. Using external elements like “the pattern for the original bargeboard” (p. 9.3) and interior décor such as “astral lamps and girandoles and Hepplewhite suite chairs” (p. 14.2), he created flawless “period rooms” (p. 17.4). His daughter was not alone in noticing this feature. As Roy, one of her childhood babysitters, remarked upon visiting, “Man, being in this room is like going back in time” (p. 65.2).

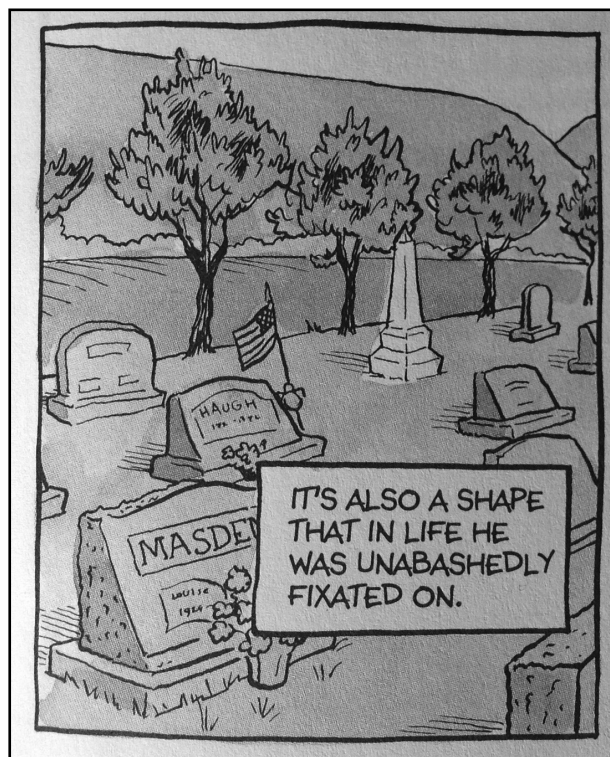
The images that accompany these passages accentuate both the visual splendor of Bruce’s completed restorations and the fact that all of them draw on architectural styles from bygone eras. In one panel, for example, Alison and her brother are depicted having a quintessential childhood experience—they are watching Bert and Ernie on *Sesame Street*—but they are doing so from a highly unusual locale: a fainting couch (Bechdel, 2006, p. 14.2). On several additional pages, Alison is shown engaging in another common activity for young people—cleaning sections of the house as part of her weekly chores. But, once again, the images make clear that these tasks are anything but ordinary. In one scene, Alison is dusting the baroque spindles of a wooden side chair (p. 15.4). In another, she is polishing a table that holds an ornamental set of crystal decanters (p. 11.5). In a third instance, she is washing the glass orbs of an ornate chandelier (p. 13.2). Given the disjunction between the era in which she and her family reside and the one embodied by their home, she assures readers, “We really did live in those period rooms” (p. 17.4).

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**Far from experiencing time in a linear and teleological manner, Bruce’s [Bechdel’s father’s] story is marked by twists, turns, loops, interruptions, stoppages, double-backs, and delays.**

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When Bruce died, he was memorialized in a way that reflected his strong connection with the past. “His headstone,” Bechdel tells us, “is an obelisk, a striking anachronism among the ungainly granite slabs in the new end of the cemetery” (Bechdel, 2006, p. 29.2). Obelisks are more commonly associated with past historical eras—ancient Egypt and classical Greece—than with the current time period. Of course, wherever and whenever these objects are found, they are also exceedingly phallic. It is difficult to imagine that this Freudian implication eluded Bechdel’s father, especially given his training, interest, and talent for decoding symbolism. Regardless, the suggestive nature of obelisks is certainly not lost on the cartoonist herself. As Bechdel says about this object in an exposition box embedded within this same panel, “It was also a shape that he was unabashedly fixated on” (p. 29.2). Her choice of the Freudian-infused verb “fixated,” combined with the placement of this discussion soon after she has disclosed his closeted same-sex activities, causes this statement to nod in the direction of Bruce’s queer nature.



**Figure 1.** Bechdel explores multiple levels of symbolism in her father’s choice of grave marker.

The drawing that accompanies these comments likewise calls attention to her father as fascinated with an item that is equal parts eccentric and phallic. The image shows the rural Pennsylvania cemetery where her father is buried. Whereas all of the grave markers in the foreground of the image are traditional headstones, the obelisk that denotes her father’s burial site stands out prominently in the middle ground of the composition. To further accentuate its difference, the obelisk is bright white in color, while all of the other objects—from the grass and trees to the headstones and sky—are presented in grey wash. Finally, given the grave marker’s long shaft and tapered tip, the obelisk can be described as being stiff, rigid, and erect in more ways than one (see Fig. 1).

Both the grave marker for Alison’s father and his death reflect the asynchronous manner in which he lived. “It’s true that he didn’t kill himself until I was nearly twenty,” Bechdel writes (2006, p. 23.1), “but his absence resonated retroactively, echoing back through all the time I knew him” (p. 23.2). Lest the significance of this observation be overlooked, she repeats it a few panels later: “He really was there all those years, a flesh-and-blood presence. . . . But I ached as if he were already gone” (p. 23.3, 23.5). The drawings that are paired with these remarks show an elementary-aged Alison and her father engaging in a physically intimate task—he is shirtless on a warm summer’s day, and she is sitting in his lap learning how to drive the riding lawnmower. Through both the words and the images, Bechdel reveals a compelling contradiction about her father’s life and especially about his connection with temporality. Although Bruce existed in time, he was also, paradoxically, outside of it; he was a Victorian in the Vietnam era, and he was emotionally and psychologically absent decades before he was physically gone.

Bruce Bechdel’s passion for Victorian architecture, however, is not the only feature that skews his relationship with temporality. An even more powerful factor is his queer gender identity and nonheteronormative sexuality. In a rhetorical question that appears in the opening chapter and that also forms the central preoccupation of the graphic memoir, Bechdel asks, “Would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?” (2006, p. 17.1). The drawing that she couples with this text box makes the question even more jarring. The image shows the entire Bechdel

family sitting together in a pew at church. While everyone else looks bored, restless, or unhappy as the service begins, Bruce is shown slyly eyeing the altar boys as they walk down the aisle. This disclosure interrupts the simple linear narrative that Bechdel has had about her family. Far from following the pattern mapped out by chrononormativity, Bruce can more accurately be seen through the lens of queer temporalities. When the cartoonist's mother reveals that her father has had sexual liaisons with other men—even during their marriage—the news wholly upends Bechdel's understanding of past chronology and thus her position in present time. As Bechdel relays to readers, "This abrupt and wholesale revision of my history—a history, which, I might add, had already been revised once in the preceding months—left me stupefied" (2006, p. 79.3; see Fig. 2).

The image that appears below these lines reinforces this sense that time has been interrupted, fractured, and even broken. The illustration offers a bird's eye view of Alison's dorm room. Significantly, she is not shown talking on the phone with her mother matter-of-factly about this issue; rather, in an outward physical detail that provides a powerful indicator of her inner psychological state, she is depicted lying on the floor in the fetal position. Her eyes are open wide in amazement as she utters a remark that causes their

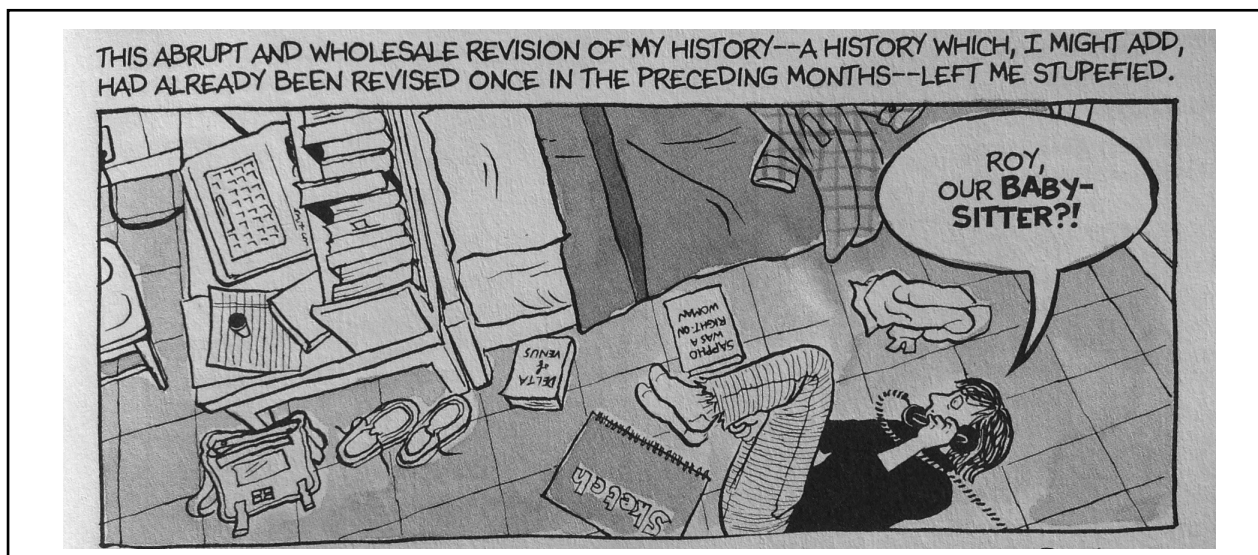
conversation to linger on and thus elongate the precise moment when her mother reveals the shocking news: "Roy, our **baby-sitter?!**" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 79.3; bold in original). Moreover, the cord that connects the telephone's receiver to its base out of the frame resembles an umbilical cord. As a result, the college-aged Alison is likened to a fetus, or at least a baby. As such, the cartoonist in this scene is simultaneously presented as being in her twenties and also not yet born. This juxtaposition of young adulthood and infancy (or, more accurately, gestation) constitutes another instance of queer temporality embedded within this scene.

This layering or doubling can be seen as queering the presentation of queer temporality itself. The news that her father had affairs with young men interrupts the linear narrative that Bechdel has had about her family, while it also disrupts her own sense of having a stable and secure

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**[The] revelation about her father's closeted queerness instantly and irrevocably alters the temporal sequencing of Bruce Bechdel's life, as well as the chronology of the cartoonist's family and her childhood.**

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**Figure 2.** Bechdel's shock at the news about her father's sexuality is conveyed both through her words and through her body language.





valent ways, transforming the formerly firm, steady, and predictable chrononormativity into unstable, even uneasy, queer temporality. The news disrupts Bruce's participation in the temporal progression from courtship to marriage to reproduction. Additionally, it interrupts the timeline formed by Alison's childhood memories of various family experiences. Finally, and even more significantly, it propels the present time back into the past, with events such as her decision to look up the police record about her father's arrest nearly three decades after it occurred. Indeed, in a passage that reveals how time has looped, twisted, and turned back on itself in the wake of knowledge about her father's homosexuality, she remarks about his apparent suicide, "Dad's death was not a new catastrophe but an old one that had been unfolding very slowly for a long time" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 83.4).

Numerous visual panels, written passages, and narrative sequences throughout *Fun Home* continue in this vein. These elements explore how the revelation about her father's queerness has queered time itself. It has caused a formerly linear timeline to become circuitous, it has shifted events that had previously seemed synchronous to emerge as asynchronous, and it has caused events that had been regarded as contemporaneous to become extemporaneous—to exist not within time, but outside of it, separate from it. One of the most poignant instances of queer temporalities in the graphic memoir is, perhaps not coincidentally, the visual centerpiece of the text itself: the semi-nude photograph of Roy that her father took while they were away on vacation to the Jersey shore (Bechdel, 2006, pp. 100–101; see Fig. 4).

As Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott (2006) have written, size routinely conveys importance in book illustrations. As they assert, "We assume that a character depicted as large has more significance (and maybe more power) than the character who is small and crammed in the corner of a page" (p. 83). While they are referencing picture-books, this same observation applies to graphic narratives, which are, after all, another type of illustrated text. The image of Roy in *Fun Home* forms the only double-page spread in the entire book. As such, the illustration is rendered several times larger than any other drawing, a detail that suggests its narrative importance. Additionally, the image is the only one that is not contained

with a panel frame. Instead, it occupies the full page, from the top to the bottom edges, from the left to the right margins. Finally, and far from insignificantly, the drawing is focalized from the first-person perspective. Readers are looking at the image as if through Alison's eyes; we see what she is seeing. In fact, the fingers of the cartoonist's left hand, the one holding the photo, are visible (Bechdel, 2006, p. 100).

In the very first exposition box on the top left side of this drawing, Alison discusses when she first saw this image: "Shortly after Dad died, I was rooting through a box of family photos and came across one I had never seen" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 100.1). The exposition box that follows locates the photograph within a historical chronology: "It appears to have been taken on vacation when I was eight, a trip on which Roy accompanied my father, my brothers, and me to the Jersey shore while my mother visited her old roommate in New York City" (p. 100.2). That said, the gap between when her father took this pin-up style photo of Roy lounging on the bed clad only in his underwear and when she first sees it is not the only temporal lapse. As the cartoonist goes on to relay, "The borders of all the photos are printed 'Aug 69,' but on the one of Roy, Dad has carefully blotted out the '69'" (p. 101.3). Alison attributes this edit to her father's failed effort at concealment: "It is a curiously ineffectual attempt at censorship. Why cross out the year and



**Figure 4.** This image makes visible how the revelation about Bechdel's father's queerness has queered time itself.

not the month? Why, for that matter, leave the photo in the envelope at all?” (p. 101.4). While her father’s alteration is a poor attempt at keeping the encounter secret, it is an effective strategy when it comes to

altering its connection to time. Blotting out the “69” from the photo divorces the image from a specific year and thus from any connection to either clock temporality or sequential chronology. This act removes the image from the realm of chrononormativity and locates it within the arena of queer temporalities. Obfuscating the year that the photograph was taken causes Roy not simply to be frozen in time, but to exist out of time; he is disconnected from any calendar date, chronological age, or historical period.

Near the middle of *Fun Home*, Alison relays, “After Dad died, an updated translation of Proust came out. *Remembrance of Things Past* was re-titled *In Search of Lost Time*” (2006, p. 119.4). She goes on to

explain how “the new title is a more literal translation of *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, but it still doesn’t quite capture the full resonance of *perdu*” (Bechdel, 2006, p. 119.5). This French verb means “not just lost, but ruined, undone, wasted, wrecked, and spoiled” (p. 119.5). One of the central preoccupations of *Fun Home* is whether the time span encompassing her father’s life can be seen as “not just lost, but ruined, undone, wasted, wrecked, and spoiled,” both because his death by possible suicide at age 44 cut his life short by many decades and because he did not live in accordance with his “erotic truth” (p. 230.1). The cartoonist vacillates on this issue. She sometimes condemns her father’s cowardice for not coming out; at other moments, she is more sympathetic, given

that, by his own admission, living openly as a homosexual “was not even considered an option” when he came of age in the 1950s (p. 212.2). While the meaning that time had in her father’s life may be unclear, indeterminate, and uncertain, the way that it is being used throughout *Fun Home* is not. Any sense of a straightforward chronology, clear linearity, and direct teleology throughout the graphic memoir is repeatedly “ruined, undone, wasted, wrecked, and spoiled.”

### Queer Futurity in *Fun Home*

Just because queer temporalities disrupt the linearity, sequentiality, and teleology of chrononormativity ought not to imply that this concept lacks a clear relationship with futurity. On the contrary, as José Esteban Muñoz (2009) argues in *Cruising Utopia*, queer temporalities are inextricably focused on becoming. Precisely because they do not follow the prescribed temporal pathway, queer temporalities are able to imagine a future that is radically different from the expected, namely, a period that is less homophobic and more egalitarian for LGBTQ individuals.

In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz details how a concern with queer futurity needs to be more of a priority in the way that the LGBTQ movement conceptualizes and utilizes time. For decades, Muñoz argues, the fight for queer rights in the United States “has been dominated by pragmatic issues like same-sex marriage and gays in the military” (Muñoz, 2009, para. 1). This focus, he asserts, is not simply presentist, but shortsighted (para. 1). It has placed undue emphasis on the current historical moment, and in so doing, it has led to social, political, and even temporal stagnancy. Because the millennial LGBTQ movement has been so fixated on addressing contemporaneous issues, it has neglected to work toward or even imagine speculative possibilities that might come. Muñoz argues that the focus on here-and-now concerns like adoption rights and marriage equality has been at the expense of conceptualizing more radical and liberating forms of futurity. If the LGBTQ movement truly seeks to move closer to what might be called a “queer utopia”—or a world that is devoid of homophobia—it needs to shift its focus out of the present time and on to one aimed at “cruising ahead.” Accordingly, Muñoz “contends that queerness is . . . a futurity bound phenomenon, a ‘not yet here’ that critically engages pragmatic presentism” (para. 3). As Jon Binnie and Christian

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Klesse (2012) aptly explain, *Cruising Utopia* “argues that queerness is essentially a rejection of the limitations of the present, and about imagining new ways of living and being together, and envisaging new modes of intimacy” (p. 582).

The finale to *Fun Home* models this concept. Although Bruce Bechdel’s death precluded any material, temporal, or physical future, it paradoxically connected him with a queer futurity through his lesbian cartoonist daughter, Alison. The closing panels to the graphic memoir discuss both the literal and figurative components of this legacy. Of course, as his biological progeny, Alison represents Bruce’s attainment of reproductive futurism. However, as *Fun Home* goes on to detail, the connection between Bruce and Alison extends beyond the mere continuation of the family name or the passing along of inherited genetics. The cartoonist also embodies Bruce’s legacy from a social, cultural, and political standpoint; her queer, creative life picks up where his left off. Unlike her parents and especially her gay father, Alison charts a life that is determined by queer futurity rather than reproductive futurity. Indeed, as she reveals near the middle of *Fun Home*, when she was still in elementary school, “I cemented the unspoken compact with [my parents] that I would never get married, that I would carry on to live the artist’s life they had each abdicated” (Bechdel, 2006, p. 73.4).

Forming yet another facet to their unconventional and even iconoclastic engagement with teleology, this detail causes the relationship that Alison has with her father to be placed in dialogue with what Judith Halberstam (2011) has termed “the queer art of failure.” As Halberstam argues in her book by that name, LGBTQ individuals have long been associated with disappointment and even defeat. As I have written elsewhere on this subject, “[B]ecause notions of success with regard to sexual activity are commonly defined not simply in heteronormative terms concerning the interplay between male and female sexual organs but also from the reproductive standpoint of impregnation and procreation, queer erotic interactions are always acts of failure” (pp. 2–3). In the words of Halberstam, “[F]ailing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp” (p. 3). That said, “Failure for the LGBTQ community is simply not a dour state of perpetual frustration; it

can also have distinct advantages and even important rewards” (Abate, 2014, p. 3). Indeed, Halberstam notes, “[W]hile failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life” (2011, p. 3). For this reason, she goes on to assert, “Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development” (p. 3). As my previous analysis of these comments explain, “Failing to conform to both gender and sexual norms has allowed LGBTQ individuals to imagine new, and more liberatory, ways of being. It has permitted them to escape the traps, pitfalls and limitations associated with mainstream heteronormative American life” (Abate, 2014, p. 3). For this reason, Halberstam states flatly, “[T]here are definite advantages to failing” (2011, p. 4).

Bruce Bechdel’s life can be seen as a multifaceted failure. The bulk of *Fun Home* reveals the ineffective and often outright disastrous job that he did performing a variety of roles in both his personal and professional life. As a father, he screamed at and even hit his children; as a husband, he cheated on his wife; as a teacher, he seduced his students; as someone whose lifelong passion was Victorian architecture and décor, he did home restorations and interior design only as a hobby; and, of course, as a man who was attracted to other men, he never had the courage to come out of the closet. Even Bruce’s seemingly greatest queer triumph—his pin-up style photograph of Roy—was also, ultimately, a failure. Whatever his motive was for blotting out the year “69,” he was unsuccessful. As the drawing of this photograph that appears in *Fun Home* reveals, the digits are still clearly visible beneath the black dots of marker. It might be tempting to attribute this condition to the fact that many years

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**More than simply wishing to avoid making the same mistakes as her father, Bechdel uses his multitudinous failures as a starting point for building a life that is more personally, professionally, and psychologically successful.**

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have passed and ink fades over time. However, it seems likely that this feature was always present. It is exceedingly rare for any magic marker, past or present, to be able to wholly obliterate text, especially characters that have been mechanically printed on a glossy photograph.

All this said, in these and other examples, Bruce Bechdel's lack of efficacy is not cause for lament. On the contrary, his multifaceted forms of failure paradoxically led to success.

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**Alison's decision to reject her father's choices and spurn the life that he led ironically does not signal an irreversible rupture in their relationship; rather, these acts queer both the connection that they have with each other and with time even further.**

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They inspired his daughter to live her life openly as a lesbian, and they also formed the basis for her resolve to be an artist as an adult. In some regards, in fact, the success of her queer, creative life was propelled by or made possible by the failure of his. As she asserts near the middle of the memoir, "[I]n a way, you could say that my father's end was my beginning. Or more precisely, that the end of his lie coincided with the beginning of my truth" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 117.1).

With her father's death occurring only four months after her decision to come out, this event forms a powerful example of the need to live openly and honestly. After all, as she confesses in the very next panel, "I'd been lying too, for a long time" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 117.2). More than simply wishing to avoid making the same mistakes as her father, Bechdel uses his multitudinous failures as a starting point for building a life that is more personally, professionally, and psychologically successful.

Alison's decision to reject her father's choices and spurn the life that he led ironically does not signal an irreversible rupture in their relationship; rather, these acts queer both the connection that they have with each other and with time even further. As aligned with what Binnie and Klesse (2012) say about queer futurity, Alison's decision involves "imagining new ways of living and being together, and envisaging new modes of intimacy" with him (p. 582). Even though

Bruce Bechdel dies, and is thus physically gone from her life at age 20, he remains psychologically present as a creative figure and as a homosexual "antihero," as she calls him (Bechdel, 2006, p. 187). Alison muses on the penultimate page, "Is it so unusual for the two things"—spiritual paternity and physical paternity—"to coincide?" (p. 231.3). In the opening pages of *Fun Home*, she sees her relationship with her father as being akin to that of Icarus and Daedalus in Greek mythology. Alison revisits this analogy in the closing panels to the graphic memoir: "What if Icarus hadn't hurtled into the sea? What if he'd inherited his father's inventive bent? What might he have wrought?" (p. 231.3). On the following page, the cartoonist reminds readers, "He did hurtle into the sea, of course" (2006, p. 232.1). The drawing that accompanies these lines connects this event from Greek mythology to her own life; it shows the front of a commercial truck, presumably the Sunbeam bread truck that struck and killed her father (see Fig. 5, upper panel).



**Figure 5.** In two juxtaposed images, the cartoonist confronts her complicated relationship with her father.

The final panel to *Fun Home*, however, reveals how Bruce Bechdel's death was not the end of his presence or influence. As the cartoonist says about her long-deceased dad, "But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 232.2). The illustration that surrounds this exposition box shows the elementary-aged cartoonist at a swimming pool jumping off a low diving board and into her father's waiting arms (see Fig. 5, lower panel). Bruce was literally there to catch her in this moment, and he was figuratively there to catch her years later when she made the even more daring leap to live her life as a lesbian and as an artist. In this way, the closing panel exemplifies José Esteban Muñoz's observation about "the anticipatory illumination of art and its uncanny ability to open windows to the future" (2009, para. 2). Or, as Binnie and Klesse have said about queer futurity, "the act of 'looking back' can be a valuable resource in helping to imagine new political possibilities and queerer futures" (2012, p. 583). By looking back into her father's life, sexuality, and death, Bechdel is able to imagine new life possibilities and alternative queer futures, ones that were less repressive and more liberatory.

### ***Fun Home* as a Platform for Classroom Conversation about Millennial LGBTQ Life**

In September 2010, longtime gay journalist Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller uploaded a video to YouTube that discussed how difficult life was for them when they were young and how much it has improved as they have gotten older. The video was prompted by the growing number of queer teens and adolescents who had been committing suicide after being socially teased, verbally taunted, and physically threatened by their peers. Savage and Miller's testimonial quickly went viral. Moreover, it inspired a variety of other LGBTQ adults to make similar videos directed at queer and questioning youth. As a result, the "It Gets Better Project" was born.

As the "About Us" page on the website explains, the endeavor sought "to inspire hope for young people facing harassment," especially for LGBTQ youth who were being bullied at school because of their gender expression and/or sexual identity ("What Is the It Gets Better Project?," 2010, para. 1). The videos produced

under the auspices of this mission and housed on the website "create a personal way for supporters everywhere to tell LGBT youth that, yes, it does indeed get better" (2010, para. 1). In the years since its founding, "The It Gets Better Project has become a worldwide movement, inspiring more than 50,000 user-created videos viewed more than 50 million times" (2010, para. 2). Indeed, as the website for the Project reveals, "ItGetsBetter.org is a place where young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender can see how love and happiness can be a reality in their future" (2010, para. 2).

The LGBTQ young people who are drawn to Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* do so out of a similar interest in queer futurity. However, the portrait that the graphic novel gives them of the past, present, and future of LGBTQ individuals and identity is more complicated than the simple teleology of "It Gets Better." *Fun Home* provides queer and questioning youth with an important opportunity to see their lives represented candidly and without censure. From the struggles, difficulties, and hardships to the possibilities, accomplishments, and inheritances, LGBTQ teens can witness both the problems and the pleasures that accompany nonheteronormativity. *Fun Home* demonstrates that just because their lives don't follow heterocentrist chrononormativity doesn't mean that they will lack a rich futurity.

This message is even more important in light of the Supreme Court ruling in January 2015 legalizing same-sex marriage in the United States. While this event is a major victory in the fight for LGBTQ rights, it has a secondary and unexpectedly negative ramification: it endorses or at least gives added credence to a certain type of teleology for nonheteronormative individuals. Whereas gay men and lesbians had previously been exempt from the expected chronological

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**The graphic memoir offers a powerful demonstration that a life that does not follow the expected chronology or conventional trajectory—from either a heteronormative standpoint or an emerging homonormative one—can be not only feasible, but fulfilling.**

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benchmarks of an individual's life—namely, getting married and having children—because they were legally precluded from them, they are now able to and, by extension, increasingly expected to conform to them.

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**An understanding of the ways in which queer temporalities work in Bechdel's text—and, in turn, help to make the narrative itself work—allows educators to introduce new intellectual ideas, alternative interpretive approaches, and different analytical perspectives into their classrooms.**

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marriage equality take time, resources, and attention away from the plight of more marginalized members of the LGBTQ community—such as “transgender people, homeless teenagers, victims of job discrimination, lesbian and gay refugees and asylum seekers, isolated gay elderly or other vulnerable members of our community” (Stewart-Winter, 2015, para. 5)—but it also inadvertently stigmatizes those who wish to live according to a different teleology. By legalizing a more conventional life chronology for LGBTQ individuals, the Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage made life choices that resisted or even rejected this trajectory less viable or, at least, even more unconventional, atypical, and iconoclastic. Phrased in a different way, it made queer temporalities even more queer.

This development causes the messages embedded in *Fun Home* to assume added narrative importance as well as cultural urgency. The graphic memoir offers a powerful demonstration that a life that does not follow the expected chronology or conventional trajectory—

Judith Halberstam (2003) has written about “the new ‘homonormativity’” that has emerged amidst “the recent lesbian baby boom” (p. 331). Timothy Stewart-Winter (2015) echoed these remarks in a newspaper article that appeared in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling legalizing same-sex marriage. His essay, while it celebrated the obvious judicial victory, also lamented it. This “joyous moment for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans,” Stewart-Winter noted, came at a very high price (2015, para. 1). Not only did the push for

from either a heteronormative standpoint or an emerging homonormative one—can be not only feasible, but fulfilling. Furthermore, Bechdel's employment of queer temporalities in telling the co-joined stories of her father's homosexuality as well as her own plays a key role—both in the appeal that this book has for adolescents and in its sociopolitical importance. Whereas the videos connected to the It Gets Better Project present the experiences of LGBTQ individuals as linear progress narratives—times are difficult when you are young, but they get steadily better as you grow up—the graphic memoir offers a much-needed and more accurate reminder that life doesn't always work out this way. On the contrary, echoing queer temporalities, life more commonly has twists, turns, reversals, and delays. Conditions may improve only to deteriorate again; a new sociocultural freedom might be eventually lost; a hard-won political gain may later be revoked or—in the case of same-sex marriage—simply not utilized or even desired by all members of the community.

During these moments, the message in *Fun Home* is that even when time loops, spirals, and folds back on itself, it is not cause for despair. As her graphic memoir powerfully demonstrates, sometimes the best way to move forward is, paradoxically, by going backwards. Especially for LGBTQ individuals who are not adhering to a heterocentrist life course, there are occasions when the past is, ironically, the pathway to the future. *Fun Home* not only provides an important commentary on the telling of LGBTQ lives, but on the twists, turns, loops, and delays that accompany growing up itself. As both the straight and the queer youth readership of *Fun Home* are acutely aware, the movement from childhood to adulthood is anything but simple and linear. Furthermore, in the same way that LGBTQ individuals have long existed outside of heteronormativity, Bechdel's graphic memoir affirms that so too can they choose to resist and even reject emerging twenty-first century notions of homonormativity.

When all of these elements are viewed collectively, *Fun Home* offers a powerful case study for how concepts in queer theory, which may initially seem too abstract to effectively incorporate into high school settings, can be utilized to good effect. An understanding of the ways in which queer temporalities work in Bechdel's text—and, in turn, help to make the narra-

tive itself work—allows educators to introduce new intellectual ideas, alternative interpretive approaches, and different analytical perspectives into their classrooms. These tools not only enable teachers to push their discussion of *Fun Home* in productive new directions, they can also be harnessed for the analysis of other texts, materials, and concepts. Indeed, some of the most commercially successful and critically acclaimed works upend conventional notions of chronology in ways that are in keeping with queer temporalities. Examples range from William Faulkner’s classic novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) to Christopher Nolan’s blockbuster film *Inception* (2010). Akin to Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, neither of these works conveys stories in a clear, linear, and chronological way. Instead, both Faulkner’s novel and Nolan’s movie employ a temporality that loops, twists, and folds back on itself: events repeat, skip ahead, or start over again from the beginning. Indeed, the innovative use of chronology is one of the reasons why *The Sound and the Fury* is such a critically acclaimed text. Likewise, the way temporality is disrupted and distorted in *Inception* is a major reason why audiences found the film so thrilling.

As I hope this discussion of *Fun Home* demonstrates, it is not only logistically possible to fold in aspects of queer theory into secondary classroom settings, but pedagogically desirable. Students benefit from being introduced to these concepts socially, materially, and, of course, intellectually. Queer theory encompasses issues that extend far beyond gender and sexuality. As a result, it provides students with interpretive frameworks as well as with critical vocabulary through which they can examine classroom materials in new, complex, and innovative ways. In light of these benefits, incorporating queer theory into high school settings becomes, I believe, not so queer after all.

When Bruce Bechdel learns that his daughter will be reading James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in her college English course, he instructs her, “You damn well better identify with every page” (Bechdel, 2006, p. 201.7). Given the way in which *Fun Home* provides young adult readers with a chance to see alternative portrayals of coming of age as well as coming out, they will likely identify with multiple factors as well. By including Bechdel’s graphic memoir in the high school reading curriculum, and especially by

exploring the text’s engagement with queer temporalities during classroom discussion, teachers can uncover how *Fun Home* speaks not simply *about* being a young person in past eras, but *to* adolescents and teens in the present day.

### Endnote

The term “queer” has a long, complicated history both inside and outside of the LGBTQ community. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* (“queer,” 2015) reveals, the term dates back to the sixteenth century to denote any event, act, or phenomenon that is “strange, odd, peculiar, or eccentric.” For this reason, around the time of the First World War, the word “queer” came to be used as a pejorative for individuals who did not conform to conventional notions of gender and sexuality. In the closing decades of the twentieth century, the word “queer” was reclaimed and rehabilitated by the LGBT movement for the purposes of collective identity and of political empowerment. Queer is now widely regarded as an umbrella term that refers to a broad array of nonheteronormative gender and sexual identities, ranging from lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender to transsexual, asexual, pansexual, and individuals who engage in BDSM. For more on the etymological, cultural, and political history of the term “queer,” see the Introduction to *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children’s and Young Adult Literature* (2011), which I coauthored with Kenneth Kidd.

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# The Stonewall Book Awards for Children's and Young Adult Literature, 2010–2014:

Memorable Characters, Current Directions

**T**he headlines and events of today speak loudly of our progress as a society and a nation in how the LGBT community is viewed and treated. The outcry over some US states' attempts to pass religious freedom bills that could negatively impact the LGBT community (Eckholm, 2015, March 30), Major League Baseball's efforts to welcome LGBT players (National Public Radio, 2015), and universities offering scholarships to hard-working students who identify as LGBT (see <http://www.utsa.edu/inclusion/>) all indicate a growing cultural change over the past several years. The new release of the updated version of the classic picturebook *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman, 2015), first published in 1989, indicates a promising direction for the LGBT community—and all young readers. In recent years, young adult literature (YAL) has mirrored these societal and national trends with a noteworthy increase in the number of books with LGBT main characters—books that depict the complexity of human relationships regardless of sexual orientation (Cart & Jenkins, 2015). These books can speak to many teens who need to see themselves in the stories and novels they read.

Given the importance of young adult books with LGBT characters, we wanted to explore the nature of these books and the current depictions of the characters within them. With this in mind, we conducted a narrative analysis to gain a deeper understanding of high-quality LGBT books currently available to students. We first present what we know about LGBT

young adult literature and then describe our examination of award-winning books with LGBT characters.

## LGBT Young Adult Literature

John Donovan's (2010) novel, *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, originally published in 1969, was the first young adult novel to address sexual identity issues and led the way for subsequent publications. In their extensive analysis of young adult books with LGBT content, Cart and Jenkins (2006) noted that from 1969 to 2004, approximately 200 books were published. During these years, the average was roughly five books per year. More recently, Cart (2011) found that the number of "best" books for young readers selected annually in November by the American Library Association's Social Responsibilities and Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Round Tables (the Rainbow List) ranged from a high of 46 in 2010 to a low of 16 in 2011. With an interest in the last several years, we conducted our own count of books on the Rainbow List and found an average of 44 books per year from 2009 to 2014 (see <http://glbtrt.ala.org/rainbowbooks/>). In short, there appears to be a promising increase in the number of young adult books with LGBT content being published.

Across the past four decades, Cart and Jenkins (2006) noted significant changes in young adult books with LGBT content. The 1970s included books that depicted homosexuality in a negative light and as something that could be changed. Some YAL charac-

ters denied their sexual orientation, and there was a persistently present fear of being physically assaulted by others. During the 1980s, some books were more positive. For example, gay parents as positive role models began to appear, as seen in Billy's Uncle Wes in *The Arizona Kid* (Koertge, 2005). LGBT characters were also found in minor roles, as siblings, teachers, and other adults. With the AIDS virus appearing during this time, books also began to mention the disease.

In the 1990s, many LGBT books focused explicitly on homosexuality (Cart & Jenkins, 2006), with homophobia as the major conflict in a large number of stories. For example, many books contain bullying episodes resulting from homophobic reactions toward LGBT characters (Harmon & Henkin, 2014). The late 1990s saw the inclusion of more LGBT characters in young adult books—a change in the sociocultural landscape indicating a wider acceptance of diverse individuals (Wickens, 2011).

While books published earlier depicted gay and lesbian characters as victims, more recent stories portray LGBT characters in positive roles where they are confident in their own identities (Cole, 2009). Since the turn of the century, we also see an increasing number of books with transgender characters, such as Julie Ann Peters's *Luna* (2004), as well as more books with same-sex parents and lesbian protagonists (Cart, 2011). Still another interesting change in more recently published books is the increase in nonfiction titles with LGBT content. Two new and notable young adult books are *Rethinking Normal* (Hill, 2014) and *Some Assembly Required: The Not-So-Secret Life of a Transgender Teen* (Andrews, 2014), both of which tell the true stories of transgender adolescents who were once romantically involved.

### **Award-Winning Books with LGBT Content and Characters**

Several awards honor young adult books with LGBT content, including The American Library Association's Stonewall Book Awards for Children's and Young Adult Literature. Beginning in 2010, the Stonewall Book Awards expanded a program to honor exceptional and meritorious English language adult books that address the lives of LGBT characters to include excellent, high-quality books for children and young adults. In addition to fiction, the books selected for this award

include different genres (e.g., nonfiction books) and book formats (e.g., picturebooks and graphic novels), opening the award to a wider range of texts with a LGBT focus.

The Stonewall Awards, along with other awards given to young adult books with LGBT characters, such as the Rainbow Award and the Lambda Literary Award, provide solid affirmation of the literary quality of the winning books while also acknowledging the value of young adult literature. Specifically, the Lambda Award, which honors published works with LGBT themes published in the United States (see <http://www.lambdaliterary.org/>), is given annually by the Lambda Literary Foundation, an organization that promotes LGBT literature and supports emerging authors. Like the Stonewall Book Awards, the Rainbow Award is sponsored by the American Library Association and honors LGBT books for children and adolescents. These award-winning books make a significant contribution to the field of young adult literature by modeling excellence in the development of character, plot, theme, and style. In addition, these books can encourage readers to think more deeply about what they already know and perhaps challenge existing ideas. Given their high quality, these books offer complex "levels of meaning, language conventions and clarity, and knowledge demands in which the reader must employ . . . specific prior knowledge such as cultural understanding" (Logan, Lasswell, Hood, & Watson, 2014, p. 32).

Given that the Stonewall Awards are one of the most recent awards to recognize quality young adult literature with LGBT content, we believe that the winners and honor books offer a solid representation of current and well-regarded books in the field. (See Table 1 for the list of winners and honors.) In fact, many of the winners were also recipients of the other awards mentioned previously. We analyzed the award-winning and honor books to find out more about what these high-quality books with LGBT characters might offer the field of young adult literature, especially in light of what the books may offer readers who need to see themselves in the characters.

We began our analysis by randomly selecting *Fat Angie* (Charleton-Trujillo, 2013) to read independently, taking notes about genre, format, types of character, facets of character, and character relationships and conflicts. (Note that books mentioned in this section are listed in Table 1, not in the reference

**Table 1.** Stonewall Book Awards for Children’s and Young Adult Literature, 2010–2014

<p><b>2014</b> <b>Winners</b> Cronn-Mills, K. (2012). <i>Beautiful music for ugly children</i>. Woodbury, MN: Flux. Charlton-Trujillo, e.E. (2013). <i>Fat Angie</i>. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.</p> <p><b>Honor Books</b> Federle, T. (2013). <i>Better Nate than ever</i>. New York, NY: Simon &amp; Schuster. Levithan, D. (2013). <i>Two boys kissing</i>. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf. Settingington, K. (2013). <i>Branded by the pink triangle</i>. Toronto, ON: Second Story Press.</p> <p><b>2013</b> <b>Winner</b> Sáenz, B. A. (2012). <i>Aristotle and Dante discover the secrets of the universe</i>. New York, NY: Simon &amp; Schuster.</p> <p><b>Honor Books</b> Adams, S. J. (2011). <i>Sparks: The epic, completely true blue, (almost) holy quest of Debbie</i>. Woodbury, MN: Flux. Moskowitz, H. (2012). <i>Gone, gone, gone</i>. New York, NY: Simon Pulse. Newman, L. (2012). <i>October mourning: A song for Matthew Shepard</i>. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press. Telgemeier, R. (2011). <i>Drama</i>. New York, NY: Graphix.</p> <p><b>2012</b> <b>Winner</b> Wright, B. (2011). <i>Putting makeup on the fat boy</i>. New York, NY: Simon &amp; Schuster.</p> <p><b>Honor Books</b> Farrey, B. (2011). <i>With or without you</i>. New York, NY: Simon Pulse. Merey, I. (2011). <i>a + e 4ever: A graphic novel</i>. Maple Shade, NJ: Lethe Press. Wilkinson, L. (2009). <i>Pink</i>. New York, NY: HarperTeen. Yee, P. (2011). <i>Money boy</i>. Scarborough, ON: Groundwood Books.</p> <p><b>2011</b> <b>Winner</b> Katcher, B. (2009). <i>Almost perfect</i>. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.</p> <p><b>Honor Books</b> Green, J. &amp; Levithan, D. (2010). <i>Will Grayson, Will Grayson</i>. New York, NY: Dutton. Hurwin, D. W. (2009). <i>Freaks and revelations</i>. New York, NY: Little, Brown. Klise, J. (2010). <i>Love drugged</i>. Woodbury, MN: Flux. Walliams, D. (2008). <i>The boy in the dress</i>. New York, NY: Razorbill.</p> <p><b>2010</b> <b>Winner</b> Bard, N. (2009). <i>The vast fields of ordinary</i>. New York, NY: Penguin.</p> <p><b>Honor Books</b> Alsenas, L. (2008). <i>Gay America: A struggle for equality</i>. New York, NY: Amulet Books. Ewert, M. (2008). <i>10,000 dresses</i>. New York, NY: Seven Stories Press. Newman, L. (2009). <i>Daddy, Papa, and me</i>. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press. Newman, L. (2009). <i>Mommy, Mama, and me</i>. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press. Peck, D. (2009). <i>Sprout</i>. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.</p>
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list.) Then we came together to discuss the book in regard to these categories and to arrive at agreement as to what we noticed. We applied this procedure for the remaining books as well, discussing our findings as we read. However, we came to realize that

the characters and conflicts in the books were more complex and needed a closer examination. Inspired by what Logan and her colleagues (2014) describe as text complexity, we then examined the Stonewall book winners in regard to character and conflict complexity.

Similar to Butcher and Hinton's (2014) descriptions of character, we considered the characters as complex if they were dynamic and multidimensional both in terms of character traits and the range of feelings and emotions they exhibited. For example, we defined 18-year-old Evan in *With or Without You* (Farrey, 2011) as a complex and multidimensional character given what we learn about the love he has for a secret boyfriend; his loyalty to a best friend; and the developing angst, worry, and fear he experiences when his friend becomes embroiled in a dangerous group called the Chasers.

In comparison, we considered characters as more unidimensional if the feelings and emotions of the character tended to be less varied and more focused on a particular goal or conflict. More unidimensional characters were identified in the books that appeal to younger readers. For example, we defined Bailey in *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008) as unidimensional since he is single-minded in his desire to wear dresses. Throughout each episode in the book, Bailey experiences a pattern of excitement about his dreams of dresses and then disappointment when told by family members that boys do not wear dresses.

For complexity in terms of conflict, we looked at the number of conflicts faced by the character. Given

the difficulty in separating character from conflict, we weave these together in our description of what we noticed among the Stonewall Book Awards recipients.

## Description of Findings

What we first noticed following our analysis was the variability of the winning and honor books in terms of genre, format, and character depictions. In recognizing and honoring high-quality LGBT literary works, the Stonewall Book Awards recipients appear to target the interests and tastes of an inclusive audience of young and adolescent readers. The awards for winning and honor books given from 2010 through 2014 represent variety in both genre and format. Of the 26 books on the list for these years, 3 are picturebooks for young children, 2 are nonfiction accounts, 18 are novels, 2 are graphic novels, and 1 is a novel in verse (see Table 2). In addition, while most of the books have a serious and dramatic tone, there are a few in which humor is interjected, such as *Putting Makeup on the Fat Boy* (Wright, 2011) and *Better Nate than Ever* (Federle, 2013). Given the significant number of fiction books in this list, we first describe what we noticed about character and conflict in the picturebooks and YA titles and then describe the three nonfiction books.

**Table 2.** Description of Stonewall Book Awards for Children and Young Adult Literature, 2010–2014

Year of the Award	Title, Author, Date of Publication, and Publisher	Genre and/or Format	Sexual Orientation	Plot Category(s)	Examples of Other Awards Received
2014	<b>Winner</b> <i>Beautiful Music for Ugly Children</i> K. Cronn-Mills 2012 Flux	Fiction	Gabe/Elizabeth, transgender teen	Know and understand authentic self  Pursue personal goals	2014 ALA Popular Paperback for YA; Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Finalist
	<b>Winner</b> <i>Fat Angie</i> e. E. Charlton-Trujillo 2013 Candlewick	Fiction	Angie, lesbian	Discover authentic self  Confront life circumstances	Rainbow Top Ten
	<b>Honor</b> <i>Better Nate Than Ever</i> T. Federle 2013 Simon & Schuster	Fiction	Nate, gay teen	Pursue personal goals	2014 Top Ten Best Fiction for YA; Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Finalist
	<b>Honor</b> <i>Two Boys Kissing</i> D. Levithan 2013 Alfred A. Knopf	Fiction	Peter and Neil, Avery and Ryan, Harry and Craig Cooper, gay couples	Focus on peer relationships  Focus on family relationships	2014 Top Ten Best Fiction for YA; Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Winner

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Table 2. Continued

	<b>Honor</b> <i>Branded by the Pink Triangle</i> K. Setterington 2013 Second Story Press	Nonfiction	Mainly gays during World War II	n/a	2014 Nominee for YALSA's Nonfiction Award; Rainbow Top Ten
2013	<b>Winner</b> <i>Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe</i> B. A. Sáenz 2012 Simon & Schuster	Fiction	Ari and Dante, gay teens	Discover authentic self Know and understand authentic self Focus on peer relationships	Pura Belpré Award; Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Winner Rainbow Top Ten
	<b>Honor</b> <i>Sparks: The Epic, Completely True Blue, (Almost) Holy Quest of Debbie</i> S. J. Adams 2011 Flux	Fiction	Debbie, lesbian	Focus on peer relationships	n/a
	<b>Honor</b> <i>Gone, Gone, Gone</i> H. Moskowitz 2012 Simon Pulse	Fiction	Craig and Lio, gay teens	Confront life circumstances Focus on peer relationships	n/a
	<b>Honor</b> <i>October Mourning</i> L. Newman 2012 Candlewick Press	Novel in verse (based on true story)	Matthew Shepard, gay man	NA	Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) Outstanding Books for the College Bound selection; International Reading Association Young Adults' Choices; Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People
	<b>Honor</b> <i>Drama</i> R. Telgemeier 2012 Graphix	Fiction—Graphic novel	Minor character, gay middle school boy	Pursue personal goals Focus on peer relationships	Rainbow Top Ten Harvey Award Nominee
2012	<b>Winner</b> <i>Putting Makeup on the Fat Boy</i> B. Wright 2011 Simon & Schuster	Fiction	Carlos, gay teen	Pursue personal goals	Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Winner Rainbow Top Ten
	<b>Honor</b> <i>With or without You</i> B. Farrey 2011 Simon Pulse	Fiction	Evan, gay teen	Focus on peer relationships	Minnesota Book Award Young People's Literature Nominee
	<b>Honor</b> <i>a + e 4ever</i> I. Meroy 2011 Lethe Press	Fiction—Graphic novel	Asher, gay teen Eulalie, lesbian	Discover authentic self Focus on peer relationships	n/a
	<b>Honor</b> <i>Pink</i> L. Wilkinson 2009 HarperTeen	Fiction	Ava, lesbian	Discover authentic self	Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Finalist

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Table 2. Continued

	<b>Honor</b> <i>Money Boy</i> P. Yee 2011 Groundwood Books	Fiction	Ray, gay teen	Confront life circumstances Focus on peer relationships Focus on family relationships	n/a
2011	<b>Winner</b> <i>Almost Perfect</i> B. Katcher 2009 Delacorte Press	Fiction	Sage, transgender teen	Focus on peer relationships	n/a
	<b>Honor</b> <i>Will Grayson, Will Grayson</i> G. Green & D. Levithan 2010 Dutton	Fiction	Tiny, gay teen  One Will Grayson, gay teen	Discover authentic self Focus on peer relationships	Children's Choice Book Award for Teen Choice Book of the Year; Abraham Lincoln Award Nominee; Goodreads Choice Nominee for Young Adult Fiction
	<b>Honor</b> <i>Freaks and Revelations</i> D. W. Hurwin 2009 Little, Brown	Fiction (based on a true story)	Jason, gay teen	Confront life circumstances Focus on family relationships	Romantic Times Reviewers' Choice Award Nominee for Best Young Adult Novel
	<b>Honor</b> <i>Love Drugged</i> J. Klise 2010 Flux	Fiction	Jamie, gay teen	Discover authentic self (does not accept himself) Focus on peer relationships Focus on family relationships	Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Nominee
	<b>Honor</b> <i>The Boy in the Dress</i> D. Walliams 2008 Razorbill	Fiction	Dennis, gay teen who is a crossdresser	Know and understand authentic self Focus on peer relationships	n/a
2010	<b>Winner</b> <i>The Vast Fields of Ordinary</i> N. Bard 2009 Penguin	Fiction	Dale, gay teen	Discover authentic self Focus on peer relationships Focus on family relationships	Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Finalist
	<b>Honor</b> <i>Gay America: A Struggle for Equality</i> L. Alsenas 2008 Amulet Books	Nonfiction	Gays	n/a	n/a
	<b>Honor</b> <i>10,000 Dresses</i> M. Ewert 2008 Seven Stories Press	Picturebook	Gay parents	Know and understand authentic self	Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Finalist
	<b>Honor</b> <i>Daddy, Papa, and Me</i> L. Newman 2009 Tricycle Press	Picturebook	Gay parents	Know and understand authentic self	n/a

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**Table 2.** Continued

	<b>Honor</b> <i>Mommy, Mama, and Me</i> L. Newman 2009 Tricycle Press	Picturebook	Lesbian parents	Know and understand authentic self	n/a
	Honor <i>Sprout</i> D. Peck 2009 Bloomsbury	Fiction	Sprout, gay teen	Confront life circumstances  Focus on peer relationships	Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Finalist

### Picturebooks

Children's picturebooks were recognized as honor books in the initial years of the Stonewall Awards. Two of the honor books in 2010, *Mommy, Mama, and Me* (2009) and *Daddy, Papa, and Me* (2009), both written by Leslea Newman, are board books that provide simple depictions of happy, safe families with young children having two mothers or two fathers. It is not surprising, given their appeal to younger readers, that these picturebooks contain characters who experience little or no significant conflict—that is, the characters are not complex. Another 2010 honor book in picturebook format is Marcus Ewert's *10,000 Dresses* (2008), a whimsical and engaging tale in which young Bailey's dream of making and wearing dresses comes true. Although the title reflects relatively simple character traits and feelings (excitement and desire to wear dresses but disappointment when family members express disapproval) and conflict (how to make this occur), this seems appropriate given the intended age of the readers.

### Young Adult Fiction

The awards from 2010–2014 were mainly given to young adult novels. For these books, we provide a description of what we noticed in regard to the characters in the books as well as several facets of characterization that emerged from our analysis, including conflict.

### THE CHARACTERS

Similar to the findings of Cart and Jenkins's (2006) extensive examination of young adult literature with LGBT content from 1969–2004, in the 18 fiction books we analyzed, the main characters are primarily gay teens. Only three books have lesbian protagonists: *Fat Angie* (Charlton-Trujillo, 2013), *Sparks* (Adams,

2012), and *Pink* (Wilkinson, 2012). Cronn-Mills's *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012) and Katcher's *Almost Perfect* (2009) are the only two books with transgender characters. In the graphic novel, *A + E 4ever* (Merey, 2011), two nonconforming teen protagonists—Asher, with an androgynous face, and Eulalie, a lonely but assertive, hard-nosed, strong-willed lesbian—blur gender lines in their interactions with each other and with peers.

### FACETS OF CHARACTERIZATION

The portrayal of LGBT characters in the Stonewall Book Awards covers a spectrum of different young adults who grapple with their sexual orientation and/or gender identity amid the challenges of being an adolescent. The feelings displayed by the characters in these books are realistically depicted, lending unmistakable credibility to their reactions to the situations in which they find themselves and also reflecting a level of character complexity.

Our examination of character revealed five facets of characterization. While some of the books contained several facets, we categorized the books based upon those facets of characterization that were critical to the story. The major facets were the following: 1) self-identity, 2) life circumstances, 3) pursuit of personal goals, 4) peer relationships, and 5) family relationships. For each category, we provide a description with examples of books. Because we view the categories as fluid and sometimes overlapping, some characters represented multiple facets of characterization. As a result, we placed some books under more than one category, such as the classification of *Fat Angie* (2013) under self-identity and life circumstances.

**Self-identity.** In some of the books, the major plot strand focuses on the efforts of the main characters to

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**In these titles, self-actualization, or an attempt to find the “authentic self,” drives the plot . . . by attending to self-identity, many characters acknowledge their sexual orientation, openly share with others their same-sex attractions, and describe themselves as gay or lesbian.**

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define themselves in regard to sexual orientation and/or gender identity. In these titles, self-actualization, or an attempt to find the “authentic self,” drives the plot. In other words, by attending to self-identity, many

characters acknowledge their sexual orientation, openly share with others their same-sex attractions, and describe themselves as gay or lesbian. This is evident in all but four books, where the protagonists are uncertain of their sexual identity. As a result, for this facet of characterization, we labeled two emerging subcategories as “knowing and understanding the authentic self” and “discovering the authentic self.” For “knowing and understanding the authentic self,” we included characters who had some inkling of their sexual identity and leaned toward LGBT. For “discovering the authentic self,” we in-

cluded characters who had no determined idea about their sexual identity.

Two examples of characters we categorized as “knowing and understanding the authentic self” are Nate in *Better Nate Than Ever* (2013) and Dante in Sáenz’s *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012). Nate, as a multidimensional character, appears confident in many aspects of his life as he comes to more fully understand his sexual identity. For example, at the beginning of the book, Nate talks about being bullied daily by James Madison and two other boys (both named Bill) and notes that one of the Bills declares Nate “not unfunny for a faggot” (Federle, 2013, p. 27). Nate then tells the reader that he is uncertain about his sexuality:

(My sexuality, by the way: is off-topic and unrelated. I am undecided. I am a freshman at the College of Sexuality and I have undecided my major, and frankly don’t want to declare anything other than “Hey, jerks, I’m thirteen, leave me alone. Macaroni and cheese is still my favorite

food—how would I know who I want to hook up with?).” (Federle, 2013, p. 27)

Toward the end of the book, when Nate finds out that one of the Bills is actually gay, too, his response is, “And one of the Bills is an outcast now. Hey. Maybe he’ll need a friend” (Federle, 2013, p. 261). Nate remains focused on his strong desire to be a star in a Broadway show and does not let his growing understanding of his sexuality interfere with this dream.

Similarly, Dante (*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*) knows and understands himself throughout the novel and is more comfortable about his gender identity than is his friend Ari. For example, when Dante and Ari first meet each other at the local swimming pool, Dante is the one who initiates a conversation with “I can teach you how to swim” (Sáenz, 2012, p. 17). He is also the one who later introduces himself to Ari’s parents. As this friendship develops, Ari describes Dante in this way:

“He [Dante] talked about swimming as if it were a way of life. He was fifteen years old. Who was this guy? He looked a little fragile—but he wasn’t. He was disciplined and tough and knowledgeable and he didn’t pretend to be stupid and ordinary. He was neither of those things. . . . He was funny and focused and fierce. And there wasn’t anything mean about him. I couldn’t understand how you could live in a mean world and not have any meanness rub off on you. How could a guy live without some meanness?” (Sáenz, 2012, p. 19)

Nonetheless, at the end of the book, Dante, despite the confidence he has about his own identity, is brutally beaten because of his openness about his sexuality. After this, Ari notes that “He [Dante] was different. Sadder. The day he came home from the hospital, he cried. I held him. I thought he would never stop. I knew that a part of him would never be the same. They cracked more than his ribs” (Sáenz, 2012, p. 325).

In contrast, *Fat Angie* (2013) by e.E. Charlton-Trujillo provides an example of the “discovering the authentic self” plot strand. While coping with the overwhelming taunting and bullying from others because of her weight problem, ninth grader Angie (called Fat Angie at school) is distraught over her older sister’s capture in Iraq several months before during her tour of duty in the Army. Angie refuses to believe the possibility that her sister may be dead—a sister who was her idol and one who helped the girls’



basketball team win the state championship. Angie's life changes with the appearance of KC Romance, a new girl at school who immediately pays attention to Angie as a person, not someone to belittle. As their relationship grows, Angie comes to realize that her own sexuality, as well as KC's, is what KC labels as "gay girl gay." In the midst of a deepening relationship with KC, Angie contends with incessant bullying at school; a contentious, nonsupportive family; a focused determination to play basketball well; and ultimately her sister's situation. As a complicated character facing complex conflicts, Angie represents a realistic portrayal of how someone might react to the profound circumstances in her life.

Another example of a character "discovering the authentic self" is Ari in Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012). At first, Ari does not understand his developing friendship with Dante, a relationship that ultimately leads Ari to better understand his own identity. While the growing but complicated friendship between Ari and Dante is the major focus of the book, the complex nature of these characters also defines their relationship. Ari is unsure of himself, an introvert with no friends and one who struggles to accept his sexual identity. There is also a level of complexity in the conflicts faced by Ari. He struggles with the ghost that haunts his family: the reason why his older brother is in prison—something his parents have refused to share with him. Ari is also conflicted in trying to understand his father and what happened to him during the Vietnam War. Ari must contend with these conflicts as he tries to understand his relationship with Dante.

In one book, *Love Drugged* (2010) by James Klise, the main character, Jamie, tries desperately to deny his authentic self by hiding that he is gay from his friends. When beautiful and wealthy Celia takes an interest in him, Jamie takes advantage of this opportunity and acts as though he is attracted to her. As this relationship develops, Jamie learns that Celia's father, a doctor and researcher, is experimenting with a new drug that "suppresses the homosexual response in the male brain" (p. 83). With his interest piqued, Jamie steals and begins to take some of the pills, hoping to stimulate a physical attraction toward Celia. Jamie must eventually come to terms with his lies, as well as the wall of deceit he has built around his family and friends. Jamie is not so much a complex character in

regard to the different feelings and emotions elicited in the story as he is filled with determination to quell his homosexual feelings—the one major conflict he faces.

**Life circumstances.** This facet of characterization features characters who face serious life issues while simultaneously contending with their sexual identities. This facet is especially apparent in the more recent award-winning books where sexuality is not the only issue on which the titles center. For example, in *Fat Angie* (Charlton-Trujillo, 2013), Angie's main concern is her missing-in-action sister. Not knowing if she is alive or dead constantly occupies her thoughts and influences her actions in response to her family and peers.

There are multiple plot strands and complex conflicts in Moskowitz's *Gone, Gone, Gone* (2012). Fifteen-year-old Craig contends with serious events in his life the year after 9/11

when sniper shootings occur around Washington, DC. When his house is burglarized and his menagerie of pets escapes through an open door, Craig is devastated and determined to find all of them. Another serious event is the separation from his long-time friend Cody, a gay man, who is now in a mental hospital after having lost his father during the Pentagon attack the year before. In the midst of this personal turmoil, Craig meets Lio, a person who is also gay and faces conflicts of his own; Lio and his twin battled cancer at a young age, but only Lio survived. Craig and Lio work at building their relationship as the community reels from the random sniper shootings and as fear spreads everywhere, especially among young people. These characters are multidimensional, as their feelings, emotions, and reactions to others differ depending upon the conflict.

Sprout in Dale Peck's *Sprout* (2009) is another example of a complex character trying to cope with a serious life issue—the death of a parent. After his mother dies, 12-year-old Sprout and his grieving father leave their New York City home and move to a rural Kansas town. Over the next four years, Sprout's father

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**These characters are multidimensional, as their feelings, emotions, and reactions to others differ depending upon the conflict.**

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deals with his grief through alcohol, and Sprout dyes his hair green and contends with being alone and having no friends. Yet, in the midst of a dysfunctional family environment and the pressures of school, Sprout finds love in an unforeseen neighbor, a love that both excites and puzzles him.

Survival is another critical life issue and serious conflict faced by multidimensional characters in two

of the books, *Money Boy* (Yee, 2011) and *Freaks and Revelations* (Hurwin, 2009). In *Money Boy*, a young Chinese immigrant, Ray Liu, struggles not only with learning the English language, but also with his strict, domineering father, a war veteran. With average grades, an interest in playing computer war games, and little ambition to appease his father by pursuing a career in

medicine, Ray also wonders how to admit to his father that he is gay. When his father accidentally finds out, he kicks Ray out of the house. Now homeless and penniless, Ray learns the grim and gritty reality of life on the streets. Ray is a complex, multidimensional character facing difficult and even life-threatening situations that evoke a range of strong emotions. At the beginning of the book, he is unconcerned about school and fairly laid back, but he undergoes a complete change in mindset once he realizes the dangers and challenges of living on the streets. Similar events occur to Jason in Hurwin's *Freaks and Revelations* when after finding out that he is gay, his mother kicks him out of the house, forcing him to live on the streets as a prostitute. Jason's situation becomes even more tragic when he is brutally attacked by a neo-Nazi teen. Only years later do these two characters happen to meet again and discover that both are open to forgiveness.

**Pursuit of personal goals.** An important consideration in some of the books is the protagonists' strong desire to pursue their goals for future careers amidst the events occurring in their lives. This is clearly evident in *Better Nate Than Ever* (Federle, 2013). Nate

has a strong desire to be a stage actor. In an unprecedented move to audition for a role in the Broadway play *E.T.: The Musical*, 13-year-old Nate, with encouragement from his best friend Libby, embarks on a bus trip from his hometown of Jankburg, Pennsylvania, to New York City without telling his parents. Woven into a recounting of Nate's amusing adventures in New York City are several subplots with complicating conflicts that reveal family discord and the need for important solutions, as well as Nate's growing understanding of his own sexuality. Yet, Nate is a single-minded character hoping to achieve his goal of becoming an actor.

Another example of a character's pursuit of personal goals is seen in *Putting Makeup on the Fat Boy* (Wright, 2011). Sixteen-year-old Carlos Duarte has wanted to be a makeup artist for as long as he can remember. Given his talents in this area, he secures a part-time job on the weekends working at a cosmetics counter in a department store, but he must also deal with a jealous and difficult boss. In addition, the conflicts in Carlos's life become more complex as family issues escalate: his sister's boyfriend is abusive and his mother loses her job. While struggling with these difficulties and challenges, Carlos finds himself attracted to a punk rocker whose intentions are unclear to Carlos.

**Peer relationships.** In some instances, the honored books focus on the connections between and the influence of peers. This is clearly evident in Ari and Dante's growing relationship in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Sáenz, 2012) and in Craig's emerging relationship with Lio in *Gone, Gone, Gone* (Moskowitz, 2012). Peer relationships become even more complicated for 18-year-old Evan in *With or Without You* (2011) by Brian Farrey. Evan and his long-time best friend, Davis, both of whom are gay, face changes in their friendship when Davis becomes tired of being bullied and wants both of them to join a group called the Chasers. The group supposedly helps people who are gay stand up to the bullies in their lives. Evan is suspect of the group, especially when he discovers that the leader, Cicada, is HIV positive and luring others into becoming HIV positive, too. Davis becomes totally committed to the group, while Evan hides the fact from Davis that he has a boyfriend, Erik. Complicating conflicts occur in Evan's life

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**An important consideration in some of the books is the protagonists' strong desire to pursue their goals for future careers amidst the events occurring in their lives.**

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as he hides his relationship with Erik and tries to help Davis realize the grave consequences of his continued connection with the Chasers.

**Family relationships.** How families come to understand and react to LGBT family members is another important facet of characterization we found in the Stonewall books. Families' reactions range from the acceptance and support demonstrated by Dante's parents in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Sáenz, 2012) to anger and disbelief as seen in Paul Yee's *Money Boy* (2011). The full range of reactions from parents is apparent in David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* (2013), a book featuring several gay characters and their partners. Avery and Ryan both have supportive parents and family members; Avery's parents even finance the gender reassignment surgeries that Avery desires. In the case of Peter and Neil, Peter's family accepts his sexual orientation, and Neil finally confronts family members who already knew but chose to skirt the issue. While Harry and Craig are found engaged in a public kissing marathon, Harry's parents and Craig's parents have different reactions. Harry's parents have always been supportive of him, but Craig never told his parents. They only find out when the kissing marathon begins—a revelation that leaves them upset and angry.

#### **DISTINCT VARIABILITY**

Three novels on the award list are noteworthy in their uniqueness. Two depict events in the lives of real people, and the other is told from an unusual and unconventional perspective.

In *Freaks and Revelations* (2009), Hurwin provides a fictional account of events that precede a devastating 1980 hate crime involving two real people, Matthew Boger and Tim Zaal. The story is told in the alternating voices of two distinctively different and complex characters: Jason, a young gay teen, and Doug, an older teen, both of whom have dysfunctional families with parents that are hard, unforgiving, and merciless. Such upbringing leads to the highly complex conflicts faced by both. By the time Jason is 14, his mother has kicked him out of the house, and he now lives on the streets as a prostitute. Seventeen-year-old Doug becomes a neo-Nazi punk rocker and drug user. After several years go by, their worlds collide one Thursday night when Doug and his neo-Nazi friends identify patrons of a nearby restaurant as

gay and then attack them as they flee. Doug is filled with hate and fueled by the drugs he has taken when he first encounters Jason; Doug soon finds himself brutally beating Jason and leaving him to die in an alley. After this unconscionable act, Jason and Doug move on with their lives and years later, as adults, find themselves once again crossing paths, but as changed individuals who understand “the devastation hate causes” and “the healing power of forgiveness and love” (p. 232).

Newman's *October Mourning* (2012) is a collection of poems forming a novel in verse that recounts the real events surrounding the brutal treatment of Matthew Shepard that led to his hate-fueled death. After being viciously beaten by two young men, Matthew was tied to a fence and left to die. Newman's writing captures the strong emotions associated with this tragedy using two techniques: different voices from multiple perspectives, and a variety of poetic structures. The different perspectives include short poems from the point of view of objects and people, such as the fence, a pistol, a witness, the bartender, and an angel. For example, the poem entitled “Witness” took the following form:

Watching in horror  
Wishing he could do something  
The man in the moon (Newman, 2012, p. 15)

Another perspective from the patrol officer's report goes like this:

two thin white tear tracks  
one red swollen blood-caked face  
*This is someone's child* (Newman, 2012, p. 24)

The other unique book with multidimensional characters and complex conflicts, *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) by David Levithan, is told from the perspective of those from a previous generation. The narrators of this story are men who died from AIDS and who now recount what is currently going on in the lives of several young gay adolescents, providing the reader with insights into the feelings, emotions, motivations, and uncertainties of the characters. Peter and Neil have been in a comfortable, positive relationship for at least a year, and Avery and Ryan, who have just met, make earnest efforts to get to know each other. Harry and Craig are no longer together, but they decide to break the world's record for the longest kiss. Then there is very lonely Cooper, who has difficulty trying to make

sense of his life. The omniscient narrators add a layer of complexity to the portrayal of these characters' stories.

### Nonfiction Books

The two nonfiction books that won Stonewall Book Honor Awards present different types of nonfiction while depicting critical events in the lives of LGBT people at different points in history: one is a chronol-

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**Both books provide opportunities for young adult readers to gain historical perspective that can provide insights into the present LGBT climate in our nation and larger society.**

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ogy highlighting the life and times of homosexuals in the United States; the other is a documentary of the treatment of homosexuals in Germany during World War II. Both books provide opportunities for young adult readers to gain historical perspective that can provide insights into the present LGBT climate in our nation and larger society.

The nonfiction book *Branded by the Pink Triangle* (Settingington, 2013)

takes us to Hitler's Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, a time when gay people were persecuted and defiled in much the same way as were members of the Jewish population. Many found themselves in concentration camps and identified by a pink triangle sewn on their shirts. Settingington describes the horrific accounts of life for homosexuals in the concentration camps, as well as the dreadful and troublesome conditions that existed when the war ended.

In *Gay in America: A Struggle for Equality* (2008), Alsenas chronicles the history of homosexuals in this country from the 1800s to the present day. Using personal stories and real photographs, the author provides a rich description of the mercurial attitude of society's acceptance and tolerance of homosexuals through the decades. Embedded in these descriptions is the growing power of gay rights as LGBT people continue to fight for equality today.

### A Close Look at One Award Winning Book

We take a close look at one more book that is representative of the quality and potential impact of the

Stonewall Book Awards recipients for children and young adult literature. A 2014 book award winner, *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (Cronn-Mills, 2012) illustrates the positive influence one individual can have over many others. The book tells the story of a high school senior, Gabe, who knows that he is a boy born in a girl's body. His strengths lie in his acceptance of his authentic self as being transgender and in his determination to pursue his interest in music. With his senior year coming to a close, Gabe finds satisfaction in his work as a DJ on a late-night shift at a radio station. At the same time, he struggles with his romantic feelings toward his long-time best friend Paige, the awkward family dynamics that result as his parents and brother come to terms with his transgender identity, and the troubling and threatening danger that ensues when students at school find out about his sexuality.

Gabe's multifaceted character is cleverly revealed in Cronn-Mills's use of the analogy of old 45 records to describe how Gabe views himself:

When you think about it, I'm like a 45. Liz is my A side, the song everybody knows, and Gabe is my B side—not played as often but just as good. When 45s were around, most DJs didn't care about B sides, but some were big hits: The Smiths' "How Soon Is Now" and U2's "The Sweetest Thing," for example. We don't have B sides anymore, since digital music wiped them out, but digital's not for me. I'm analog, Wall of Sound, old school to the core, and it's time to let my B side play. My radio show is a deep new groove on it. (p. 10)

This description evokes strong imagery to help readers come to understand Gabe and his stance in the world. We see him as a multifaceted character who is courageous and determined to be true to his authentic self.

Cronn-Mills insightfully extends this analogy to Gabe's performance as the DJ on the late-night radio program where he comments that ". . . life is just programmed chaos. Everybody starts out one side—that's the programmed part. Then chaos happens and our album flips. We get fat or thin, or dye our hair and pierce our nose. But those are just our outsides. Our insides are still beautiful, even if we think we are ugly children" (p. 42). As a disk jockey, Gabe gains an audience of followers who dub themselves as the Ugly Children Brigade and who ultimately play an important role in Gabe's life. What makes this story so poignant is the fact that Gabe's efforts to be himself, his honoring of his B side, become such a powerful

influence on others who also want to be themselves, despite the reasons they may have for feeling oppressed or silenced. Gabe represents how one person can have a positive effect on others in a community. This thematic message affirms the recognition this book has received.

## Final Thoughts

Our analysis of the Stonewall Book Awards recipients contributes to what we know about children's and young adult books with LGBT characters in several ways. First, we found variety in genre and text format that is encouraging. It is important that books with a focus on LGBT characters are found not only in conventional realistic fiction, but also in novels in verse, graphic novels, picturebooks, and nonfiction. Such diversity in genre and format can reach a wider audience.

Second, the Stonewall Book Awards recipients over the first five years of the award (2009–2014) portray many LGBT characters in memorable and positive roles, similar to what Cole (2009) reported about the books published in the nineties. Most are portrayed not as victims, but rather as adolescents finding their place in the world. Many exude self-confidence about their authentic selves while confronting major issues in their lives.

Both the Stonewall fiction and nonfiction books provide hope and optimism as evidenced by the many positive resolutions we noted across the winning and honor titles. The fictionalized characters in the novels, as well as the stories of real people in the nonfiction books, display realistic efforts of characters and people trying to forge meaningful relationships with others. Such efforts lead to much-needed hopeful endings in many of the books. We believe that young adult readers need and deserve satisfying endings to realistic novels with LGBT characters, as well as the promising words in nonfiction books that document the lives of real people who identify themselves as LGBT. Furthermore, we agree with Lo (2011), who argues that young adult books offer an avenue for creating positive change that challenges deeply embedded views of homophobia. Emotional involvement with characters in books can bring about a greater awareness, understanding, and acceptance of the lives of others.

Finally, this narrative analysis of the Stonewall award winners and honor books stands as evidence

of the changes that are slowly, but steadily, occurring in our wider society. Respect for individual differences, especially for differences in sexual orientation, has and is gaining momentum, and this momentum is beginning to be reflected in young adult literature in diverse and positive ways.

Nonetheless, more progress is needed before

LGBT adolescents can find multiple role models in books. While there are some gay characters, there are few stories about lesbians or transgender teens or LGBT teenagers of color. Because books with LGBT content provide an opportunity for young people to envision possibilities and to think about strategies that might or might not work for them, we need many more high-quality books that feature a wide range of adolescents in a wide variety of realistic situations. We agree with Bond (2011) that "perhaps having available books which present positive characters with diverse sexual orientations will allow more young adults to find themselves in literature, while providing counter-images to the stereotypes too often found in popular media" (p. 275). Similarly, our work supports Cart and Jenkins's (2015) claim that:

as we began the second decade of the twenty-first century, LGBTQ YA books remained a literature in transition. Despite the many gains in the field, further advances are still needed. For example, too many titles, especially those that remain focused on coming out, continue to treat homosexual or transgender as a problem or issue. Similarly, there are too few novels that feature characters whose LGBTQ identity is simply a given, as it is in stories about heterosexual characters. And in that same vein, few novels acknowledge that homosexuality encompasses more than the sex act, that love is also part of the equation. (pp. xiii–xiv)

The Stonewall books can play a role in helping all young adults learn about and understand people who are LGBT and become allies and supportive friends.

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Given that the serious life issues that are dealt with in the books affect students from all walks of life, young people might see connections between themselves and their LGBT peers that they hadn't imagined. For example, in *Putting Makeup on the Fat Boy* (Wright, 2011), Carlos's desire to become a famous make-up artist is contrasted with the problems of his mother losing her job and his sister's abusive relationship. As Carlos tries to figure out how to support his mother and his sister, he begins to use his ability to maneuver through complex social and cultural situations, eventually leading to positive outcomes.

We also believe that we need more stories of real-life individuals and how they deal and/or dealt with their identities and life circumstances. For this reason, *Gay in America: A Struggle for Equality* (Alsenas, 2008) is important. As Alsenas chronicles the history of homosexuals in this country from the 1800s to the present day, the stories of people who lived lives that were once invisible become visible. We also need more informational books that portray the complexity and diversity of LGBT people around the world. Then perhaps we can begin to change the dismal statistics around suicide among people who are LGBT (Burton, Marshal, Chisolm, Sucato, & Friedman, 2013) and the lack of support that so many LGBT students feel in their schools. These books, in conjunction with LGBT-positive curricula, can help schools become safer places where all young adults can thrive and experience well being and success. The right book in the hands of the right student at the right time can make a difference.

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## A Multitude of Stories:

### The Power of Short Story Collections to Disrupt “Single Stories”

“All of my friends seem to have different sets of experiences . . . . But one thing that most people have in common is an ability to say, even if only to themselves, where in the spectrum they fall at any particular moment.”

—Levithan & Merrell, 2006, unpaginated introduction

**L**evithan and Merrell (2006) inform readers that everyone who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) has a unique story and set of life experiences. Alluding to an iconic symbol often appropriated by the LGBTQ community, they also assert that individuals can determine where they fit within the varied rainbow of what constitutes this community and that people’s identities can shift rather than remain static. These were understandings of which I was unaware during my adolescence as I struggled to accept and understand my own identity as a gay male.

While the publication of children’s and adolescent literature inclusive of LGBTQ characters continues to rise (Moller, 2014; Naidoo, 2012; Reynolds, 2011), the majority of titles continue to focus on particular ends of the spectrum rather than the greater diversity. For example, LGBTQ-inclusive texts may predominantly show gay, White, middle-class males as opposed to people of other races, ethnicities, social classes, sexual orientations, or gender identities. In addition, characters in such texts might portray greater gender nonconformity or exaggerated characteristics than others. Thus, many adolescent readers may remain unable to see themselves in literature unless they are members of dominant cultural groups or align with stereotypical performances of gender nonconformity. This possibility is especially true when considering transgender-

inclusive literature.

Children’s and adolescent literature can provide a multiplicity of perspectives and identities through which and in which students may learn about others and themselves. It can serve as a “window,” helping young adult readers see and develop understandings of others’ realities, as well as provide a “mirror” in which adolescents may see reflections of themselves (Bishop, 1990, 1997). (More information about this brief essay, including source material, is available at <https://www.psdschools.org/webfm/8559>.) For this to occur, however, there must be a variety of representations available in the literature.

Facilitating conversations about sexual orientation and gender expression in classrooms is one way to create spaces that are more inclusive for all learners, and literature can be a powerful vehicle to promote such discussions (Blackburn, Clark, Kenney, & Smith, 2010; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013; Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008). However, LGBTQ-inclusive books do not often make their way into classrooms due to systemic or self-imposed censorship (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013). In the instances when such books are shared with students, sometimes only one or two texts may be used in class discussions or be available on class or library bookshelves. Thus, these few texts become the sole representatives for the LGBTQ group, failing to depict varied and nuanced

identities and perpetuating a single story (Adichie, 2009; Bishop, 1997).

This article aims to build on ideas about how children's and adolescent literature can provide windows and mirrors and disrupt single stories through the affordances of short story collections that provide increasingly diverse perspectives within a single text. Questions guiding this introductory exploration include: 1) What multiple and overlapping identities exist within the LGBTQ, and specifically the transgender, community? 2) What authentic and accurate texts exist that portray these varied identities? 3) How can educators and young adult readers use the texts to showcase and explore the diversity within a particular cultural group? Not only does exploration of such questions help us rethink conceptualizations of normal and embrace differences, it also reinforces the understanding that there exist myriad ways to exhibit gender identity and that ideas of normality must be questioned.

Rather than seek to unpack LGBTQ-inclusive literature in lump sum (and thus run the risk of stereotyping, excluding groups, and further perpetuating single stories), this article honors the fact that within each group identified by those letters there exist both individuality and distinctness. One specific group that has been traditionally marginalized and stereotyped is the transgender community. This article begins by providing background information, such as terminology related to gender identity, and the theoretical framework guiding the explorations discussed herein. Transgender representations within media, including children's and adolescent literature, will then be discussed, along with the affordances of such literature and findings from analysis. Additional resources and ideas for educators are then provided, followed by implications of short story collections as tools to interrogate and combat single stories.

## **Building Background: Terminology, Windows, Mirrors, and Single Stories**

### **Gender Identity Terminology and Considerations**

When considering sexual orientation or gender identity, terminology can be new for some people, and terms sometimes evolve or change over time. Some educators may have a concern about which terms to use and wonder if they are using terms accurately and

respectfully. The definitions used within this article for words and phrases related to gender identity are borrowed from Kuklin (2014). Kuklin defines transgender as "a general term that refers to a person whose identity, expression, or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth" (p. 178). Some transgender individuals identify as female to male (FTM). This would be a person assigned female at birth but who identifies as a male. Such individuals may also call themselves trans men. People assigned male at birth but who identify as female sometimes use the term male to female (MTF), or trans women. "Trans" is sometimes used as an inclusive term meant to represent a wide variety of identities under the transgender umbrella. The term cisgender refers to a person whose gender performance and identity align with the gender assigned at birth. However, some individuals prefer terms other than those listed above, and some people prefer to think of identity as fluid. Labeling and categorizing people with terms can be precarious, and broad generalizations about any group of individuals should be avoided (Browne & Nash, 2010; Maguire, 2014). This article is informed by such realizations.

Educators may find the online glossary provided by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD; see references) a particularly helpful resource for terminology related to sexual orientation and gender identity. It is also important to note that there is a distinction between sexual orientation and gender identity. Being transgender relates to a person's gender identity (how one identifies and performs gender) and is not the same as a person's sexual orientation. Since this article explores transgender representation within literature, gender identity is the primary focus.

### **Theoretical Applications: Windows, Mirrors, and Single Stories**

In her 2009 TED talk, Nigerian storyteller Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie speaks about how she was both a victim and a culprit of single stories at different points of her life. Adichie explains that single stories are developed because of limited or nonexistent representations provided through literature, the media, or life experiences. Adichie asserts, "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incom-



plete. They make one story become the only story” (para. 24). Tschida, Ryan, and Swenson Ticknor (2014) discuss how when the concepts of windows and mirrors (Bishop, 1990) and the dangers of the single story (Adichie, 2009) are brought together, they “stretch and reinforce each other in productive ways” and have a “recursive relationship” (p. 29). As will be shown further in this article, the lack of diversity within trans-inclusive children’s and adolescent literature may result in a lack of windows and mirrors to different identities and may thus perpetuate a single story. This has the potential to make it increasingly difficult for adolescents who are gender nonconforming or questioning their identities to further develop themselves and connect with literature.

## Transgender Representations

In their depiction of trans-individuals, television shows like LOGOTV’s “RuPaul’s Drag Race” (Bailey, Barbato, Campbell, Corfe, Charles, Post, Salangsang, & Murray, 2009) and movies such as *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Penfold-Russell, Quin, & Elliott, 1994) depict adult male crossdressers donning heavy make-up, teased hair, and strong sarcasm.

While shows like Amazon’s “Transparent” (Soloway, Hsu, & Ganatra, 2014), Fox’s “Glee” (Murphy, Falchuk, Di Loreto, Brennan, Friend, Lerner, & Buecker, 2009), and news reports about Caitlyn Jenner make visible increasingly nuanced depictions, such media predominantly sensationalize trans-individuals and reflect particular cultural groups or stereotypes more than others.

In children’s and adolescent literature, 10 books were published in 2014 and 2015 featuring transgender youth (see Table 1). Similar to the limited diverse representations of transgender individuals in the media, the majority of these books showcase middle-class, White, MTFs. Only one book, *Some Assembly Required: The Not-So-Secret Life of a Transgender Teen* (Andrews, 2014), depicts a FTM transition. This book is a companion to the MTF-inclusive novel, *Rethinking Normal: A Memoir in Transition* (Hill, 2014), written by Andrews’s partner at the time. The books *Double Exposure* (Birdsall, 2014), *Alex as Well* (Brugman, 2014), and several other titles within the list are each fictional accounts written by adults.

Transgender-inclusive books for younger audiences include the picturebooks *I Am Jazz* (Herthel & Jennings, 2014), *Jacob’s New Dress* (Hoffman & Hoffman,

**Table 1.** Children’s and Adolescent Literature with Transgender Protagonists Published in 2014-2015

	Genre/Length Types of Visuals (if any)	Main Character’s Gender Identity	Race	SES
<b>Some Assembly Required: The Not-So-Secret Life of a Transgender Teen</b> (Andrews, 2014)	Memoir / 256 pp. Photographs	Female to Male	White	Middle class
<b>Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress</b> (Baldacchino, 2014)	Realistic fiction, picturebook / 32 pp.	Male to Female	White	Middle class
<b>Double Exposure</b> (Birdsall, 2014)	Realistic Fiction / 304 pp. No visuals	Intersex, Female	White	Middle class
<b>Alex as Well</b> (Brugman, 2014)	Realistic Fiction / 224 pp. No visuals	Intersex, Female	White	Middle class
<b>George</b> (Gino, 2015)	Realistic Fiction / 240 pp. No visuals	Male to Female	White	Middle class
<b>I Am Jazz</b> (Herthel & Jennings, 2014)	Realistic fiction, picturebook / 32 pp.	Male to Female	White	Middle class
<b>Rethinking Normal: A Memoir in Transition</b> (Hill, 2014)	Memoir / 272 pp. Photographs	Male to Female	White	Middle class
<b>Jacob’s New Dress</b> (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014)	Realistic fiction, picturebook / 32 pp.	Male to Female	White	Middle class
<b>But, I’m Not a Boy!</b> (Leon, 2014)	Realistic fiction, picturebook / 32 pp. Illustrations	Male to Female	White	Middle class
<b>Gracefully Grayson</b> (Polonsky, 2014)	Realistic Fiction / 256 pp. No visuals	Male to Female	White	Middle class

2014), *But, I'm Not a Boy!* (Leon, 2014), and *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchino, 2014). *I Am Jazz* was coauthored by transgender teenager Jazz Jennings and an adult writer. *Jacob's New Dress* (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014) was written by parents describing the experiences of their son. Chapter books include *George* (Gino, 2015), the story of a gender non-conforming fourth grade student, and *Gracefully Grayson* (Polonsky, 2014), whose central character is in the sixth grade.

These books exemplify an increasing (and much needed) publication of children's and adolescent literature inclusive of transgender individuals, and such books are important to include within classroom libraries and discussions. However, as Table 1 demonstrates, they also predominantly reflect certain races and gender identities and thus run the risk of creating single stories based on who is, and is not, present in the literature.

Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2013) discuss interrupting White, male, LGBTQ-inclusive stories with narratives that include lesbians, people of color, or diverse family structures to illustrate "the ways that a whole variety of marginalized identities are interconnected" (p. 228) and that "there are people who have overlapping and multiple identities" (p. 228). A short story collection can contain a variety of individuals diverse in age, race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, and life experience.

One specific text breaks the cycle created by some of the other texts listed in Table 1, showcases diversity within the trans-community, and presents adolescents' voices. In the nonfiction collection of photo essays, *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out* (Kuk-

lin, 2014), readers meet six transgender individuals through a collection of narratives that articulate each person's unique experience. Readers of this text may find that the diversity of stories provides windows and mirrors for various experiences and may be particularly beneficial for adolescents questioning their own gender identities. Jessy, one of the teenagers featured in Kuklin's book, expresses this sentiment as a youth questioning his gender identity: "I guess people had questions about me. I was questioning me, too. I wasn't sure what I was" (p. 6).

When the images in media and literature only portray single stories of certain stereotypes or dominant cultural groups (i.e., White MTFs), children and adolescents who question their gender identity may have difficulty finding reflections of themselves. They become unsure of who they are or who they might become. Short story collections, such as *Beyond Magenta* (Kuklin, 2014), contain diverse narratives that provide students a variety of windows and mirrors for seeing transgender individuals (see Table 2).

To create *Beyond Magenta*, Kuklin met transgender teenagers through advocacy groups, such as the Callen-Lorde Community Health Center in New York City and Proud Theater in Madison, Wisconsin. In her author's note, Kuklin (2014) describes her process for selecting individuals to include within the book, stating, "It was important to find youths from wide-ranging ethnic, religious, and socio-economic circles so as not to mislabel 'transgender' as rich or poor, white or of color" (p. 166). Not only does Kuklin want to ensure that her book represents the diversity within the transgender community, but she implies that her readers are also a racially and socioeconomically

**Table 2.** Individuals featured in *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out* (Kuklin, 2014)

Character	Narrative Length	Visuals (if any)	Main Character's Gender Identity	Race	SES
Jessy	28 pp.	Photographs with face	Female to Male	Thai	Middle class
Christina	42 pp.	Photographs with face	Male to Female	Hispanic	Middle class
Mariah	20 pp.	No visuals	Female to Male	Biracial	Low income
Cameron	26 pp.	Photographs with face	Genderqueer	White	Middle class
Nat	26 pp.	Photographs with face	Intersex, Gender Neutral	White	Middle class
Luke	14 pp.	Photographs, face excluded	Female to Male	White	Middle class

diverse group.

Nikolajeva (2005) describes the implied reader as “the authors’ idea about their audience, the idea found in the text itself” (p. 247) and having “a particular age, gender, ethnicity, religion, politics, level of education, cultural background, and so on, which all affect the construction of the texts” (p. 253). Kuklin (2014) and each of the six transgender teenage writers in *Beyond Magenta* do not formally state who their target audience is. However, they appear to write with the intent that others may learn more about the transgender community and the diversity that exists within it. Mariah, one of the teenagers showcased in Kuklin’s (2014) book, states, “I want people to know what I went through. I want people going through the same things to know they are not alone. Transition? Everyone goes through one kind of transition or another. We go through transitions every day” (Kuklin, 2014, p. 91). Mariah alludes to several implied readers, including heterosexual readers who might learn more about what she went through, as well as readers who may be questioning their own gender identities. Mariah’s story coupled with the other narratives within this text demonstrate that not only are individuals diverse, but so are their experiences and the ways they confront obstacles in their lives.

### Disrupting Single Stories: Content Analysis

Lo (2011) surveyed 371 young adult (YA) titles published during 1969–2011 regarding their representation of LGBTQ characters. She found that less than 1% of the books were LGBTQ-inclusive. Further interested in exploring trends in gender representation within these LGBTQ-inclusive books, Lo surveyed books published between 2000 and 2011 (see Figure 1).

Of these LGBTQ-inclusive books, 50% featured male protagonists, 25% featured female protagonists, and only 4% featured characters who identified as transgender or genderqueer. (The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network [GLSEN] describes genderqueer as a term used by people who identify their gender to be somewhere on the continuum in between or outside the binary gender system altogether. Genderqueer people may prefer gender-neutral pronouns.) Thus, the stories representative of the LGBTQ community most often reflected boys. This perpetuates a

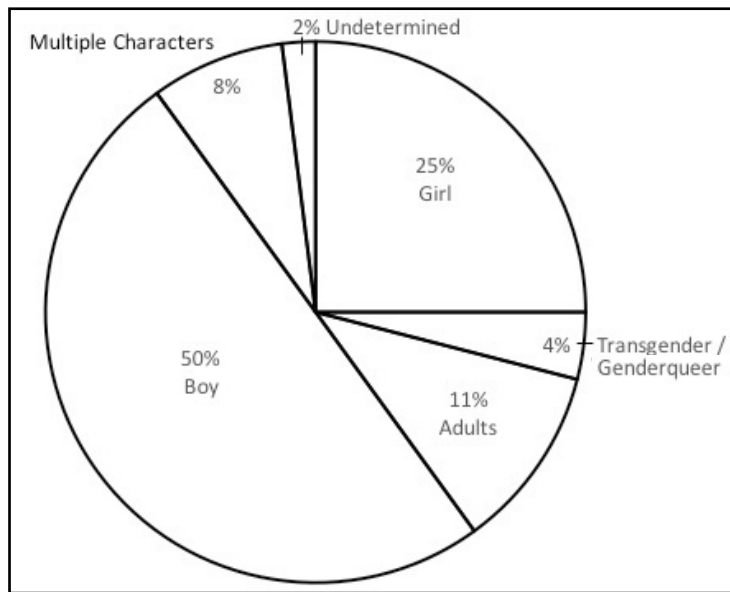


Figure 1. LGBTQ-inclusive YA Novels by Gender, 2000-2011 (Lo, 2011)

dominant narrative and a single story within children’s and adolescent literature. In a later study that focused solely on gender representation within LGBTQ young adult novels, Lo (2014) found that 75% of the texts included cisgender main characters, and the majority of these characters were male (see Figure 2).

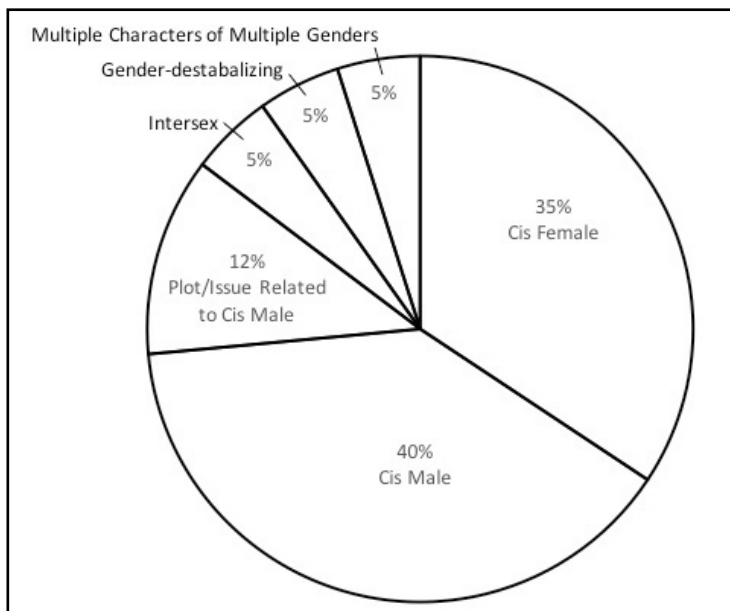


Figure 2. Main Character Gender Representation in 2014 LGBTQ-inclusive YA Novels (Lo, 2014)

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**[This] analysis sought to explore the racial, socioeconomic, and gender diversity within the texts as a demographic representation of whose lives are and are not visible within recent publications.**

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Intrigued by these results and wanting to further unpack the variation existing within those limited texts written about transgender individuals, I embarked on an introductory content analysis of recently published trans-inclusive children's and adolescent

literature. Table 1 (included earlier on p. 61) provides a survey of the ten children's and young adult books published in 2014 and 2015 (at the time this article was written) that were inclusive of transgender individuals. These texts were found using online searches through such sites as Amazon.com and the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database. I began by searching for titles of which I was already aware and then looked at suggested titles provided by the site based on that search. I also used keywords. In addition, I explored the websites for book awards pertaining to LGBTQ-themed children's and adolescent literature, including the Stonewall Awards presented by the American Library Association and the Lambda Literary Awards presented by the Lambda Literary Society.

Based on my research, the list in Table 1 contains all of the children's and adolescent books published during 2014 and 2015 with main characters who identify as transgender (as defined by Kuklin, 2014). Narrowing the search to titles published within 2014 and 2015 was done for several reasons. There appeared to be a rapid increase in the publication of trans-inclusive texts during these years compared to the past. In addition, books published prior to 2014 reflected the same trends as those found by both Lo and myself within the 2014 and 2015 publications. Narrowing the list to these two years ensured that this study would focus on the most recently published texts and that the corpus for analysis would be manageable.

Rather than focus this analysis on themes related to the experiences of the trans-individuals in the text and their commentary (which could have intriguing

results within a future study), this analysis sought to explore the racial, socioeconomic, and gender diversity within the texts as a demographic representation of whose lives are and are not visible within recent publications. As I read through each of the picture-books, novels, and short stories, I documented this information to compare the results. Such a study helps to reveal the need for increasingly diverse representations and the affordances provided by the short story collection.

All of the characters in the trans-inclusive books listed in Table 1 are White and middle class, and none of the titles depict transgender people of color. Nine of the ten books portray MTFs. The only book that depicts a counter-narrative of a FTM was written in conjunction with another novel portraying a MTF protagonist. These findings regarding gender representation and race within the transgender-inclusive children's and young adult literature published in 2014 and 2015 are consistent with Lo's (2011, 2014) analyses of LGBTQ-inclusive young adult texts.

However, an analysis of the collection of narratives in *Beyond Magenta* (Kuklin, 2014) provided wider representation (see Table 2). Readers are introduced to Thai, Hispanic, Biracial, and White individuals who come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. While two of the individuals are MTF, the other four identify as FTM, intersex, genderqueer, or gender neutral. In addition to varying demographics, the stories represent myriad life experiences, such as each transgender teenager's relationships and levels of acceptance with family and friends, school support structures (or lack thereof), use of hormones, psychological aspects of the transition process, and personality as reflected through the narratives. The use of photographs adds another dimension of diversity since readers can visualize how each teenager performs gender identity. As collaborators in the publication of their own text, all of the teenagers worked with Kuklin to decide which photographs would be used and how much of their physical self they wished displayed through photographs and use of real names versus pseudonyms. Thus, diversity in individuals' comfort levels and preferences is also exhibited.

Cameron, one of the teenagers showcased in Kuklin's (2014) book, states:

Being trans is not something that is accurately portrayed in the media. So even if my dad had seen stories in the news,

they would not have included trans theory; they would not be all encompassing. And since there are so many ways to be trans, so much diversity within the trans community, he wouldn't have any idea about who I was. No. Anything about me had to be communicated by me. (pp. 112–113)

Through the six narratives in *Beyond Magenta*, readers are introduced to various identities and can garner an increasingly nuanced vision of the diversity that exists within the transgender community beyond the single stories of dominant groups portrayed in the media and other recent publications within children's and adolescent literature.

### Short Story Collections and Ideas for Educators

There are a number of additional short story collections that provide diverse narratives and representations of race, age, socioeconomic class, gender identity, and gender performance. Although *Beyond Magenta* (Kuklin, 2014) is the only adolescent text within this article (and of knowledge to the author) solely inclusive of trans individuals, the following nonfiction texts include trans narratives in addition to stories reflecting people who identify as gay, lesbian, and bisexual.

Similar to *Beyond Magenta*, another narrative collection entitled *The Full Spectrum: A New Generation of Writing about Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Other Identities* (Levithan & Merrell, 2006) shares stories authored by young queer voices. While the majority of the entries are prose, others are written as poems, series of letters, or photo essays, adding genre variety as well.

Other texts, such as *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living* (Savage & Miller, 2012) and *The Letter Q: Queer Writers' Notes to Their Younger Selves* (Moon, 2012), are written by adults with adolescent readers in mind. Contributors to these collections include Jacqueline Woodson, Brian Selznick, Malinda Lo, Ellen DeGeneres, David Sedaris, and Chaz Bono among many others. *It Gets Better* (Savage & Miller, 2012) was written as part of the larger "It Gets Better" campaign and in conjunction with the Trevor Project as a way to combat suicide rates of queer youth. Contributions within this edited book are made by both allies and individuals who identify as LGBT, and stories span such topics as coming out, family and romantic relation-

ships, school and community lives, success beyond adolescence, and advocacy.

Although fictional, *How Beautiful the Ordinary: Twelve Stories of Identity* (Cart, 2009) includes works by a variety of authors depicting love, sexual orientation, and gender identity in a variety of ways. In particular, three stories within this collection share trans-experiences: "Trev"

by Jacqueline Woodson, "My Virtual World" by Francesca Lia Block, and "The Missing Person" by Jennifer Finney Boylan. Other fictional short story collections that include diverse sexual orientation representations (as opposed to gender identity or trans-narratives) are *How They Met and Other Stories* (Levithan, 2008) and *Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence* (Bauer, 1994), reflecting the experiences of those who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The latter book includes contributions from such authors as Jane Yolen, Lois Lowry, Gregory Maguire, Leslea Newman, Bruce Coville, and Francesca Lia Block. These texts, along with the others listed above, can help readers to rethink

conceptions of normality by disrupting single story representations and showcasing a wider diversity of the LGBTQ spectrum.

Educators may wish to have students read such collections of short stories to compare and contrast the individuals within the texts. Adolescents might be asked to construct Venn diagrams in which they find similarities and differences between themselves and individuals represented in the texts. Educators could have students conduct analyses that survey representations of race, gender, or socioeconomic class in the short story collections and compare their findings to representations they see on school bookshelves or in

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**Through the six narratives in *Beyond Magenta*, readers are introduced to various identities and can garner an increasingly nuanced vision of the diversity that exists within the transgender community beyond the single stories of dominant groups portrayed in the media and other recent publications within children's and adolescent literature.**

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the media, paying particular attention to which representations are and are not visible.

Resources such as the intersectionality circle available on the University of Michigan's Student Life

Spectrum Center website (<https://spectrumcenter.umich.edu/article/new-identity-intersections-resources-our-website>) and the "Gender Unicorn" available from Trans Student Educational Resources (<http://www.transstudent.org/gender>) can be used by adolescents for analysis of themselves and/or the individuals in the texts as a way to consider various identities and

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**Short story collections such as *Beyond Magenta* . . . provide multiple narratives that reflect the overlapping and nuanced identities within the LGBTQ community.**

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how those identities overlap and affect individuals; students can also critically explore which identities are present or absent in texts or other societal spaces.

Simply having such short story collections available in classrooms and libraries can be such an important first step in providing additional windows and mirrors that invite students to learn about others and to increase the likelihood that young adult readers who are gender nonconforming, LGBTQ, or questioning may see reflections of themselves, thus combating stereotypes of what it means to identify and exist as an LGBTQ individual.

## Conclusion

This article sought to explore three questions: 1) What multiple and overlapping identities exist within the LGBTQ, and specifically the transgender, community? 2) What authentic and accurate texts exist that portray these varied identities? 3) How can educators and young adult readers use the texts to showcase and explore the diversity within a particular cultural group? Naidoo (2013) states, "With the ever-increasing population of queer children and queer families with children, now is the time for high-quality children's books representing this cultural group. Along with the need for more quality books, [. . .] additional studies are necessary to understand the collective content within queer children's literature" (p. 169). Although

an introductory study, it is my hope that this article has delved into such inquiry and contributed to the increasing body of scholarly work related to LGBTQ children's and adolescent literature, its affordances, and possibilities for the classroom, and that future studies and classroom explorations will continue to pursue its avenues of inquiry in greater depth.

Short story collections such as *Beyond Magenta* (Kuklin, 2014), along with the other titles described in this article, provide multiple narratives that reflect the overlapping and nuanced identities within the LGBTQ community. If educators only place one or two LGBTQ-inclusive books on their shelves or in classroom discussions, then these books become the sole voice of the LGBTQ population. Consider that the average length of a transgender-inclusive young adult chapter book published in 2014 and 2015 was 259 pages. Those 259 pages may become the single transgender story an adolescent reads. On the other hand, short story collections such as *Beyond Magenta* provide multiple narratives in 180 pages, with each narrative an average of 26 pages in length. Even if students only read two or three of the narratives rather than the text in its entirety, they have been afforded multiple perspectives and diverse representations.

As an adolescent who identified as a closeted gay male, I grappled with my identity and yearned to see representations in texts and media of others with whom I might find commonalities. Countless adolescents may have similar feelings. Ideally, educators and young adults will read widely so that they learn about a multitude of life experiences, but short story collections can serve as tools to make diverse stories increasingly accessible. The scope within such collections provides windows and mirrors for adolescent readers to see possibilities beyond single stories.

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## “Everybody Else Gets to Be Normal”:

Using Intersectionality and *Ms. Marvel* to Challenge “Normal” Identity

Given Said’s (1991) argument to resist “a single overmastering identity” (p. 17) and the fact that we now live “in this new world of cultural fluidity” (McCarthy, Giardina, Harewood, & Park, 2003, p. 452), I believe it is relevant to focus on literature in the classroom that examines how youth narrate or grapple with their identities. In schools, a hegemonic approach frames identity as singular (McCarthy et al., 2003); however, as noted by Ayse Caglar (1997), there is a rising trend wherein people identify themselves in terms of “plural and fluid cultural identities” (p. 169). To bridge this gap, it is essential that “schools, universities, and educators acknowledge the multiple identities of students and the different identity ‘capital’ students have in each context. . . . [W]e must go beyond the racial binary in understanding students’ identity construction” (Li, Lin, & Wang, 2014, p. 60).

Said (1993, 2000) has also suggested that a vigorous, deep, and complex understanding of culture and identity should inform educational practice. In this article, I argue that educators can benefit from employing an intersectionality lens as a form of literary analysis that challenges a “normal identity.” I suggest that educators, administrators, policymakers, and literacy researchers utilize an intersectionality mindset to resist thinking of students and others as having “a single overmastering identity.” Specifically, I demonstrate how using an intersectionality framework in analyzing a piece of literature can explicitly address differences rooted in social issues such as racism, sexism, and Islamophobia.

The young adult graphic novel *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* (2014) was created by writer Willow Wilson and comic book artist Adrian Alphona. The series stars a teenage, Muslim, Pakistani American girl from New Jersey named Kamala Khan. Kamala is not only learning how to accept multiple aspects of who she already is, but she also begins to develop superhuman powers that propel her further into her own process of identity construction. Given the way she is positioned across these identities, Kamala is the proverbial “underdog”; she is a female in a patriarchal society, a person of color in a White majority society, and a Muslim in a Christian-dominated society. In a way, *Ms. Marvel* can be seen as a “beacon for intersectionality” in that it features “a *specific sort* of outsider in terms of gender, race, religion, and nationality” in a work of literature “adaptable for consumption by audiences who do not belong to that marginalized group” (Kent, 2015, p. 524, emphasis in original). *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* brings the “just like them” and “us versus them” discourse front and center for a general audience to witness and challenge through the perspective of a minoritized and commonly discriminated against character type. More important, *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* urges readers to consider how those from marginalized backgrounds work toward achieving acceptance without assimilation.

### Review of Literature on Intersectionality

Until the 1980s, sociological scholarship regarding race, gender, and religion worked in isolation; for instance, “race relations scholarship explored race from



the perspective of *men*, [and] gender scholarship explored gender from the perspective of *white* women” (Belkhir & Barnett, 2001, p. 158, emphasis in original). Intersectionality borrows from a collection of theories and combines them to become its own new theory. In a reductionist sort of way, one can broadly claim that intersectionality began as a blend of both feminism and critical race theory, focusing on the intersections between sexism and racism in examinations of the oppression of women of color. Separately, gender-based and race-based research failed “to account for lived experience at neglected points of intersection—ones that tended to reflect multiple subordinate locations as opposed to dominant or mixed locations” (McCall, 2005, p. 1780). Intersectionality began as a response to “the problem with identity politics—it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” (Crenshaw, 1994, p. 1242).

American critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term *intersectionality* and described it using the metaphor of a road:

Intersectionality is what occurs when a woman from a minority group . . . tries to navigate the main crossing in the city. . . . The main highway is “racism road.” One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street. . . . She has to deal not only with the one form of oppression but with all forms, those named as road signs, which link together to make a double, a triple, multiple, a many layered blanket of oppression. (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 196)

Within this metaphor, there is an understanding that intersectionality deals with a “matrix of domination” (Collins, 1998), that oppression is constantly changing, and that different aspects of an individual intermingle with other social issues. People should not have to be “multiply-marginalized” (Choo & Ferree, 2010), forced to choose between intragroup differences or to privilege race over gender, as all identities are lived and experienced simultaneously and continuously. Without intersectionality, in an examination of “‘people of color’ and ‘women,’ respectively, one analysis often implicitly denies the validity of the other” (Crenshaw, 1994, p. 1252). Intersectionality has evolved to include many other multiple forms of oppression, developing its “original foci on race, ethnicity, gender, and class to incorporate citizenship, sexuality, religion, age, and other dimensions of subordination, across many different social settings” (Bose, 2012, p. 67).

Doing an intersectionality analysis is important in *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* because it allows readers to better understand the ways in which Muslim American women are specifically marginalized in our society today. Expanding on this understanding, educators and other educational practitioners can utilize intersectionality to examine their own lives and those of their students to better improve their practice.

## Methods

Before I delve into a description of my interpretive process, it is crucial to acknowledge the difficulty in conceptualizing a set methodology for intersectionality. The aims and objectives of intersectionality cannot “be realized only through a full-fledged grand theory or a standardized methodology” (Crenshaw, 2011, as cited in Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 789). Intersectionality resists the impulse to have a formal methodology because, as a fluid interpretative framework, it thrives on the reality of tensions existing between categories. Intersectionality is best conceived as a way of thinking “about the problem of sameness and difference in its relation to power” (p. 795).

That being said, I was able to apply intersectionality as a tool to analyze the “dynamics of power” (Cho et al., 2013, p. 795) through a process that was heavily iterative. Prior to analysis, because “intersectionality’s insistence on examining the dynamics of difference and sameness has played a major role in facilitating considerations of gender, race, and other axes of power” (p. 787), I first read the text and identified language and visuals in *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* that were emotionally or politically charged in regards to race, gender, and religion. I flagged scenes signifying racist, sexist, and/or religious microaggressions and then coded for instances of the intersectional categories of race, gender, and religion. I collected and categorized these codes to later analyze for their implications through an intersectionality lens.

After multiple readings and grappling repeatedly with certain scenes or visuals, my understandings and analysis evolved as layers were added to the identities of Muslim American women in the graphic novel. Given the specific time and place in which the text is set, I also interrogated and added the social and historical contexts to the analysis. For instance, the social context of this graphic novel’s setting is impor-

tant given the fact that it is taking place during a time when American society's anti-Muslim sentiments are prevalent in a post 9/11 era. To apply an intersectional analysis, I considered answers to the following guiding questions:

- What issues of difference or sameness are being displayed in the text or visual?
- How do the issues of difference/sameness interact with each other?
- In what ways does power affect the issues of difference/sameness?
- In what ways do political, social, or historical contexts interact with the issues of difference/sameness?

Engaging in multiple readings and viewings of the text and images provided more insights with each added layer, making this intersectional work iterative. To better display this cognitive work, an example of how I categorized and began analysis can be seen in Appendix A. These methods and questions are not meant to be prescriptive but rather a starting point for conceptualizing how to use intersectionality as a literary analysis.

## Intersectionality Analysis of *Ms. Marvel: No Normal*

In this next section, I examine the identities and narratives of Muslim American women in the graphic novel through an intersectional framework as analyzed through the multiple lenses of race, gender, and religion. First, I situate the categories semi-separately and then follow with a more holistic intersectional analysis.

### Gender

The intersectionality framework best serves the understanding of Muslim women's personal oppression by exploring the intersecting factors of gender and religion. In speaking about the veiled Muslim female, the graphic novel represents Islamophobia and the single narrative of the oppressed Muslim female. Observe the scene in Figure 1. Zoe (a classmate of Nakia and Kamala) says, "Your headscarf is so *pretty*, Kiki. I love that color. But I mean . . . nobody *pressured* you to start wearing it, right? Your father or somebody? Nobody's going to, like, *honor kill* you? I'm just *concerned*" (p. 2, emphasis in original). Zoe's language

reveals a hierarchy of power based on race, gender, and religion. Zoe condescendingly compliments the headscarf of Nakia (Kamala's friend) by calling it "pretty." According to Patricia Collins (2000), "Within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blonde, thin white women could not be considered beautiful without the Other" (p. 89). Here, Zoe refers to Nakia as pretty, but in doing so, positions herself as the true decider of what counts as pretty, since she is the epitome of "blue eyed, blonde" American beauty.

There are many forms of discrimination occurring in this one scene, all of which attack Nakia's identity. Nakia is seen here wearing a hijab (head covering scarf, or veil). From Zoe's point of view, the hijab connotes a stricter and more violent version of Islam, hence the simplistic and reductive assumption about Nakia's purpose for wearing a hijab. First, Zoe, knowing that Nakia prefers not to go by her "'Amreeki' nickname" (p. 1), purposely ignores her cultural and given name to remind her of the American dominant culture. Second, the word "pressured" implies a lack of agency among Muslim women and therefore suggests that only Islamic women are purposely oppressed. Again, the veil is used as a signifier of female



Figure 1. Zoe remarks on Nakia's religious practices (Wilson & Alphona, 2014, p. 2). ©MARVEL

oppression (Bilge, 2010; Mahmood, 2005; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2008). Third, Zoe is the embodiment of how the West stereotypes Muslim women. The patriarchy and violence against Muslim women are used repeatedly in the West to essentialize, stereotype, and disseminate anti-Islamic sentiments. Mahmood (2005) states that “Western popular media continues to portray Muslim women as incomparably bound by the unbreakable chains of religious and patriarchal oppression” (p. 7).

Bilge (2010) argues that Western thinking equates “the Muslim veil with women’s oppression by Islamic patriarchy. . . . It argues that veiled women are either coerced to wear the veil or develop a false consciousness; in both cases they are *devoid of agency*” (p. 14, emphasis in original). Attempting to refute the stereotype that Zoe is propagating, Nakia contradicts Zoe by revealing that her father actually wants her to remove the hijab. Incredulous, Zoe dismisses her with a “Really? Wow, cultures are so *interesting*” (p. 3, emphasis in original). Nakia’s point of view is not even considered: “What veiled women have to say about their veiling is irrelevant and cannot change the meaning of the veil, since they are alienated and unwittingly adopt the views of their oppressors” (Bilge, 2010, p. 15). Nakia is not given a chance to speak up against Zoe, representative of the dominant group. Before Nakia has a chance to defend her beliefs and customs, Zoe leaves without any inclination to hear further explanation, as seen in the panel that follows this scene.

Furthermore, Zoe maintains the same attitude of White feminists or Orientalist feminists in that she believes that veiled Muslim women need to be “saved” by the West (Khiabany & Williamson, 2008). When Zoe says, “I’m just *concerned*,” she positions herself as a type of White savior who is graciously yet condescendingly looking out for a Muslim girl—a designation she perceives as helpless and oppressed. Staunaes (2003) argues that “social categories do not count only for the others, the non-powerful and the non-privileged: they also count as conditions for the more privileged and powerful people” (p. 105). Zoe, being non-Muslim, has more power than Nakia; she is in a position of privilege and power and is “concerned” for her “othered” peer. Not only is Nakia othered because of her religious practices, but because of her gender, as well. She is specifically a female Muslim,

one who is presumed to be weak, without agency, and worse, a willing participant in her own oppression. The authors, Wilson and Alphona, deliberately include a protagonist facing these multi-layered subjugations to display the various forms of oppression that *American* society perpetuates for women of color.

### Religion

The idea of religious difference is also taken up in *Ms. Marvel: No Normal*. As a Muslim living in post-9/11 America, Kamala exists in a world environment that carries anti-Islamic sentiments. Zoe says to Kamala at a party: “I thought you weren’t allowed to hang out with us *heathens* on the weekends! I thought you were, like, *locked up!*” (p. 9, emphasis in original). This comment, coming from Kamala’s White counterpart, is an example of Orientalism (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2008) in that it propagates Eurocentric intolerance. Even prior to the infamous terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in 2001, Said in 1980 remarked on Orientalist stereotypes of Muslims as “crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world, presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression” (para. 11).

Zoe expresses negative attitudes towards Muslim culture in the emphasized features of her speech—“heathens” and “locked up” (p. 9)—and in her conflation of Muslim life with hostility and female oppression. Zoe first uses verbal irony and sarcasm by saying “us *heathens*” to position how Muslims might view non-Muslims. By sarcastically using a derogatory term in reference to herself, Zoe characterizes Muslims as the aggressors and fanatics. Reducing the language further to its minimal elements, Zoe maintains the dichotomous “you” versus “us” dialogue. As Said (1980) confirms: “Islam has always been seen as belonging to the Orient, its particular fate within the general structure of Orientalism has been to be looked at with a very special hostility and fear” (para. 5). Zoe represents the oppressors as portrayed through her own hostility and fear.

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**The patriarchy and violence against Muslim women are used repeatedly in the West to essentialize, stereotype, and disseminate anti-Islamic sentiments.**

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Figure 2. The Khans at dinner (Wilson & Alphonso, 2014, p. 5) ©MARVEL

Authors Wilson and Alphonso (2014) argue not only against the veil as a signifier of an essentialized or monolithic Muslim identity, but also against other general stereotypes of Islamic identity. As seen in Figure 2, there are multiple and distinctive depictions of Muslims in this graphic novel. We meet Kamala’s Turkish friend Nakia, who wears a veil; Kamala herself is Muslim but doesn’t wear any traditional clothing or veil. Kamala’s pious brother wears a traditional *kurta salwar*<sup>2</sup> with the *taqiyah*,<sup>3</sup> and her father wears a Western button-up shirt with a tie.

Through these diverse portrayals, the writers attempt to dispel the monolithic Muslim identity as extremist and aggressive. At the very least, the lesson to be learned here is that there is complexity within these religious identities and that individuals should not be carelessly categorized. This point can best be connected to McCall’s (2005) notion of intracategorical complexity in that the graphic novel is “interested in revealing—and indeed cannot avoid—the range of diversity and difference within a group” (p. 1782). In accordance with intersectionality, an analysis that goes beyond the notion of different categories of a single identity is crucial because it emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the various layers of identities within groups and categories themselves to

critically and accurately gain a deeper understanding of those we study.

Others may believe that Kamala covets her White peers for being part of a hegemonic society. However, I contend that Kamala can be better understood as resisting categorization and marginalization. When Kamala says, “Why am I stuck with the *weird holidays*? Every-body else gets to be *normal*. Why can’t I?” (p. 8, emphasis in original), she means “normal” in more ways than one, which points to intersectionality being a critical lens

from which to understand her point of view. “Normal” is taken up to refer not only to her racial identity but also her religious identity, since the “weird holidays” she references are Islamic religious celebrations such as Eid and Ramadan. In the United States, holidays such as Christmas and Easter are celebrated nationally while also having deep roots in Christianity. Not being part of the “normal” population and group makes Kamala feel isolated and “othered” (Said, 1978), which causes her to push back.

In Figure 3, Kamala sneaks out of her room to go to a party she is not allowed to attend. Here she defies her parents’ wishes; we see her with one hand fisted, eyes closed, one leg in her room and the other out, with the thought panel stating, “Why can’t I?” Metaphorically, this scene resembles Kamala’s internal



Figure 3. Kamala sneaking out (Wilson & Alphonso, 2014, p. 8) ©MARVEL

struggle as a first-generation, Pakistani American, Muslim girl caught in a dilemma of simultaneously wanting to be part of the hegemonic society and to respect her cultural norms. This visual suggests that she is stuck between two worlds—with one leg in the house representing her Pakistani culture and upbringing, and the other leg out, signifying American culture. Having one foot in and one foot out is symbolic of the intersectional lived experiences of many first-generation individuals who feel torn between differing races, genders, and religion.

### A More Holistic Analysis through Intersectionality

As Kamala experiences her first encounter with superheroine power, she hallucinates as part of her transformation (see Figure 4). Kamala sees three floating figures surrounded by clouds and white birds, suggesting a divine and spiritual tone. In the forefront is the original Captain Marvel, whose moniker Kamala later claims, flanked by Captain America to the right and Iron Man to the left. The American superheroes have their eyes closed with serene-like facial expressions, suggesting they are at peace or meditating. Captain America has his arms up and palms facing inward like a Muslim person in prayer, and Captain Marvel has one hand with the thumb and ring finger together, a common pose in Eastern culture’s meditation practices. Captain Marvel’s other hand is outstretched, palm facing in, again as if in Islamic prayer. Visually, there is an integration of the divine with Islamic traditions. The White characters are juxtaposed with the Islamic facial and bodily positions of prayer, giving the reader a new image of what it means to have multilayered identities.

The text further reinforces the integration of the Eastern world in that the words said by Captain Marvel are in Urdu. The wording quotes a popular and traditional Sufi poem written by Amir Khrusro, a great scholar of music and history, court poet, and widely reputed writer in Medieval India (Vatuk, 1969). The *Ms. Marvel* creators include this piece of culture for the readers in the original and in English translation. The Urdu version is presented in bigger and bolded text in contrast to the English version, as if daring the reader to engage with the Urdu text and read it word for word. The English translation is provided under-

neath, smaller, not bolded, and divided between the men. This symbolizes how Kamala internalizes her identities hierarchically.

The superhero woman in the forefront, speaking Urdu, represents how Kamala sees herself as Pakistani first; then come the men, speaking English as a sub-category of her “American” self. Visually speaking, Kamala is the entire image; she is both Pakistani and American. Constructions of identity are further complicated by the fact that a Sufi poem is used. Sufism is heavily tied to Islam and aims “to direct the spiritual traveler to an experience and knowledge



Figure 4. Marvel heroes confer powers on Kamala (Wilson & Alphona, 2014, p. 15). ©MARVEL

of God through an inner cleansing and purification of self” (Khalil, 2014, p. 373). Wilson and Alphonso depict a scene in which Kamala is having an out of body spiritual experience, a revelation about who she is. By adding this piece of Pakistani culture and Islamic religion to the face of the White superheroes, Kamala’s identity is shown to be complex and multidimensional.

Analyzing this scene as a whole calls attention to social divisions and hierarchies of power. Yuval-Davis

(2006) states that “[s]ocial divisions . . . exist at the level of representation, being expressed in images and symbols, texts and ideologies” (p. 198). Based on Yuval-Davis’s idea of representation and subjectivity existing in images, one would have to agree that on a basic level, the image of three White superheroes conferring or blessing a Brown girl with powers suggests that

power comes from the dominant group. This portrayal is perhaps intentional by the creators of *Ms. Marvel* in that it functions to give a societal critique of how marginalized and minoritized women truly get their power—not through self-empowerment but through the culturally dominant group in power. Even if those superheroes are an imagined self, Kamala’s consciousness recognizes a level of exclusion in that they are positioned above her, which also translates to the division of power between those who are White and those who are a minority, like her.

In further examining the positionality of the heroes, the next question could be, “Why is a White, blue-eyed, blonde woman flanked by White men?” One could argue that this is a feminist dream in that Kamala dreams of a strong and powerful woman coming first, positioned ahead of the men in a male-dominated and patriarchal society. However, interpreting this spatial symbolism is problematic in that the concept of race is ignored, thus suggesting the idea of White Feminism. Even more upsetting is that after the hallucination, Kamala herself transforms into the White, blond, blue-eyed bombshell that is the original

Captain Marvel. Conversely, Lehoczky (2014) asserts the reason for Kamala’s initial White transformation is that she first “has to get control of her powers, which tend to morph her without her volition into a blond clone of the original character. Kamala has to embrace her true self to banish blondness” (para. 10). Wilson and Alphonso arguably attempt to reveal a process in which marginalized women go through constructing a multifaceted identity. Before Kamala can become a hero, perhaps her own hero, she must defeat this ideology of White supremacy.

## Pedagogical Implications in Practice

Considering Sipe and Brightman’s (2009) argument that graphic novels have a “complex semiotic significance” (p. 68), it makes sense to acknowledge “the importance of students’ developing visual literacy” (Versaci, 2008, p. 96). Educators have the potential to utilize graphic novels as “a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of single-definition school literacy curriculums” (Low, 2012, p. 375). While the more traditional inclusions of graphic novels in the classroom manifested in the form of historical nonfiction pedagogies (Kersulov, 2016; Hughes & Morrison, 2014), the scaffolding of complex content (Jacobs, 2007), and the instruction of English language learners (Chun, 2009), graphic novels have become tools “to explore [students’] memories and identities” (Kersulov, 2016, p. 69) and “[are] not merely a medium for bridging adolescent literacies and traditional curricula, but also intimately connected to issues of identity” (Simon, 2012, p. 521). In addition, graphic novels have evolved to being used to critically investigate social issues; for instance, Hughes and Morrison (2014) have used diverse graphic novels, such as the *Adventures of Rabbit and Bear Paws* series (2006–2015), with students to examine “difficult social, political, and economic issues” (p. 125), such as the colonization of indigenous and First Nations groups in Canada. Even at post-secondary levels, graphic novels can be employed to create spaces for social and critical consciousness (Carleton, 2014).

Adhering to Collins’s (1998, 2000) and Crenshaw’s (1989, 1994) social theories of intersectionality, I argue that reading and questioning *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* through this particular lens can identify social issues and, in turn, create a space that disrupts

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hegemony. Intersectionality can help reveal “how power works in diffuse and differentiated ways through the creation and deployment of overlapping identity categories” (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 797). To incorporate graphic novels, identity, and literacy studies in the classroom, I suggest conceptualizing a line of questioning and activities based on the guiding questions described in the methods section. However, those looking for more explicit materials can refer to Jaffe’s (2015) work on how to include *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* in their lesson planning. As an advocate for and teacher of graphic novels as a means for developing visual literacy and critical reading, Jaffe has generated her own questions and activities that, I would contend, align with an intersectionality perspective.

Specifically, under the section “Cultural Diversity, Civic Responsibilities, History, and Social Issues,” Jaffe proposes a number of discussion starters and activities for using *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* to engage students on those topics. Below, I offer three of those starters and expand on how they might launch discussion and critical thinking in the classroom.

1. “Discuss why it is so difficult for Kamala and Nakia to fit in. Discuss why it is difficult for ‘different’ people to fit in and what your class and community might do to help others in your community belong.” (Jaffe, 2015, section 9)

This prompt relates to my guiding question, “What issues of difference or sameness are being displayed in the text or visual?” A whole-class exploration of how the characters are categorized by others and how they defy simple categorization given their multiple identities might serve to support students who are having a harder time getting started. Using an intersectionality analysis can also help students understand “that there are always elements of power embedded in language, disciplinary methods, metaphors” (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 796). The guiding question, “In what ways does power affect the issues of difference/sameness?” also builds on Jaffe’s prompt and urges young readers to consider difference as it relates to fitting in. Fitting in with *whom* or *what* is central to applying an intersectionality lens, as fitting in requires the acknowledgement of a dominant and hegemonic culture. By employing intersectionality here, the theory offers “a framework for contesting power and thereby link-

ing theory to existent and emergent social and political struggles” (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 800).

2. “Discuss the similarities and differences of Muslim customs versus American and/or any other cultures or religions represented in your classroom/community/reading group.” (Jaffe, 2015, section 9)

This prompt can be adapted to the text to best serve an intersectional lens by answering the second guiding question, “How do the issues of difference/sameness interact with each other?” Students can start with the “versus” model of the question inherent in Jaffe’s framing and follow up with a discussion on similarities and differences of customs associated with being Muslim *and* American (or any other combination of cultures and religions). Combining two of the categories and analyzing how they interact provide a deeper and more complex understanding of the categories and their limitations.

3. “Have students share their own cultural folklore. Compare and contrast how the stories are told/written.” (Jaffe, 2015, section 9)

This sort of activity relates to what other scholars, such as Dimitriadis and McCarthy (2001), urge educational stakeholders to do: “We must strive for the goal of the creative fusion and vitalization of those mini-narratives that every unique individual—every student and every teacher—brings to a human encounter such as the pedagogical setting, exploring the full richness in their particularities” (p. 118). To make this prompt more focused on intersectionality, students can create their own intersectional identity maps consisting of any identity categories they feel safe to share. How they make sense of each category will reflect how they narrate their own identities. A follow-up aspect of this activity could include asking students another intersectionality guiding question: “In what ways do

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**A whole-class exploration of how the characters are categorized by others and how they defy simple categorization given their multiple identities might serve to support students who are having a harder time getting started.**

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political, social, or historical contexts interact with the issues of difference/sameness?” Educators might encourage students to consider this question as it relates to them personally.

This labor of delving into the multiplicities of identities with context-specific nuances matters in education and is essential in “addressing such issues as marginality, oppression, difference, identity, and representation” (Asher, 2008, p. 13). Starting with a fictional and graphic novel character such as Kamala Khan can be an innovative way to challenge students to consider others’ minoritized and marginalized experiences before asking them to look into their own intersectional identities. These methods, questions, and activities are not meant to be prescriptive, but rather serve as suggestions for how intersectionality work could be employed in literacy and our lives. As Freire and Macedo (1987) would affirm, such work could be helpful in reading both the word and the world.

## Conclusion

The intersectionality theoretical framework, particularly given its flexibility, can serve as a beneficial tool for literary analysis. Through “an intersectional multi-level analysis which takes into account reciprocal effects between the various levels” (Degele & Winker, 2011, p. 51), readers can gain a more complex and comprehensive understanding of unfamiliar characters. Engaging in an intersectionality reading of *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* reveals that Kamala, and to some degree, her Muslim American female friend, struggle with the phenomena of self-defining as a group as opposed to defining the self against what others’ definitions are. Ultimately, Kamala’s experiences become about rearticulating herself on the White dominant culture’s own terms and then fighting to shift the power balance, eventually challenging the White monolithic standards.

I argue that an intersectionality lens is a significant tool for reading—not only as an approach to literary analysis, but also as a way of thinking about classroom practice. Through an intersectionality analysis, we have the great potential for interpreting texts and the world around us in a profound way. Collins’s (2000) “matrix of domination” and idea of looking at women of color through the multiple lenses of race and gender allow readers to evaluate the power

dynamics, systems of privilege, and marginalization in the graphic novel and society. When employing “intersectional-type work, it is crucial to foreground it as a form of political critique that examines why the social world is configured the way it is and that confronts the work of power” (Dhamoon, 2011, p. 240). Intersectionality analysis can serve as a tool for educators and students to critically evaluate systems of oppression and power from multiple angles in order to better improve the lives of those from marginalized populations and acknowledge that within every student reside multiple identities.

## Endnotes

1. “Amreeki” is Hindi for “American.” Also seen spelled as “Amriki.”
2. Kurta salwar is a Pakistani and Indian cotton garment consisting of a long top over pants.
3. Taqiyah is a skull cap.

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## Appendix A: A Sample of the Author's Categorization and Analysis

### Example 1 (Text):

“You thought that if you disobeyed your parents—your culture, your religion—your classmates would *accept* you. What happened instead? . . . They *laughed* at me . . . Like, Kamala’s finally seen the light and kicked the dumb inferior *brown people* and their rules to the *curb*” (Wilson & Alphona, 2014, p. 16, emphasis in original).

<b>Race:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “your culture”</li> <li>• “dumb inferior brown people”</li> <li>• (Pakistani)</li> </ul>	<b>Gender:</b>	<b>Religion:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “your religion”</li> <li>• (Muslim)</li> </ul>
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### Intersectional Implications:

- Kamala is *unacceptable* to her classmates because of her race and religion.
- This is intersectional because she is doubly oppressed. Her identity includes experiencing xenophobia for being Pakistani and Islamophobia for being Muslim (*social/political issues*).
- Because Kamala acknowledges her imposed inferiority, she is bringing forth the “us” versus “them” discourse to the forefront (*issue of power between White supremacy and minoritized groups*).

### Visual:



Kamala reflecting on her identity (Wilson & Alphona, 2014, p. 8) ©MARVEL

<b>Race:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Her mirrored self is of a lighter skin tone in comparison to the darker skin color on her hand.</li> <li>• “Pakorras” are Indian &amp; Pakistani food.</li> </ul>	<b>Gender:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Signed out of health class”: This relates to Muslim girls not being able to participate in physical education classes (Hamzeh, 2012).</li> </ul>	<b>Religion:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Weird holidays” refer to Islamic traditions such as Eid and Ramadan.</li> </ul>
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### Intersectional Implications:

- Kamala is having a “wishful thinking” moment in that she compares herself culturally to the hegemonic culture, perhaps wishing she was White and thus included instead of excluded.
- While looking at herself in the mirror and not seeing “normal,” Kamala indirectly insinuates her personhood to be the problem. “Everybody else gets to be *normal*.” If that logic was to be inverted, it would mean that she is not “normal.” Therefore, her reality (like our reality) is that being Pakistani and Muslim makes one *abnormal*.
- Kamala is expressing as an “other” the injustice of her being excluded based on the forced and tacit label of “difference” centered on her race.

# Dare to Be Different:

Celebrating Difference and Redefining Disability in Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

## Setting the Context

### Alan Brown

I first met Siobhan McIntyre, a senior English major at Wake Forest University, during the fall of 2015 on the first day of EDU 231: Adolescent Literature. EDU 231 is a survey of literature course that centers on the lives of adolescents and young adults with specific attention given to the reading and interpretation of classic and contemporary literature across genres. The course was advertised thematically with an emphasis on exploring adolescent and young adult literature and the impact of censorship in schools and society. The primary theoretical text used in the course was Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis's (2015) *The Youth Lens: Analyzing Adolescence/ts in Literary Texts*, which encourages students to examine "how ideas about adolescence and youth get formed, circulated, critiqued, and revised" (p. 506) in texts written about adolescents and young adults.

Course assignments for EDU 231 included two activities adapted from Lent and Pipkin (2013): 1) dialogue with a censor, in which students address and respond to rationales commonly provided for censorship, and 2) censorship simulations, including a mock school board meeting and a mock parent-teacher conference. Other course assignments included a class project in which students produced an exhibit in the university's library for banned books week, a small-scale literature review of research and practitioner journal articles on the censorship of adolescent and young adult literature, and a final project that invited

students to select from among four prompts, one of which was *The ALAN Review's* call for manuscripts about exploration of difference.

Throughout the semester, I was impressed with Siobhan's interpretations of and insights into the novels we read in class (see sidebar, p. 80 for a sample of the assigned texts). When given the options for the final project, she enthusiastically selected *The ALAN Review's* call for manuscripts as her prompt. In her paper, she focused her attention on Junior, the protagonist from Alexie's (2007) *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and the language he used to explore his understandings about his disability and its effects on his life. It was only later that I learned how Siobhan's own personal experiences impacted her reading of the text. Her story reminded me of one of my favorite paragraphs from Brown and Mitchell (2014) about the purpose and utility of young adult literature:

Young adult literature is written *about* teenagers, *for* teenagers, and within contexts that mirror the world of teenagers [emphasis in original]. In these texts, they are not asked to identify with Dostoevsky's 19th-century Russian protagonist who is contemplating the murder of a pawnbroker or Hawthorne's adulteress who is shunned by her Puritan community. Instead, they see their lives reflected in the characters, settings, plots, conflicts, and themes, and they find issues nested in familiar contexts that are pertinent to their daily lives: social pressures, bullying, eating disorders, familial strife, and identity crises. (p. 6)

It was then I realized that the crucial context of disability was missing from the list, and after further

## Sample of the Assigned Texts in EDU 231

### Adolescent Literature Thematic Focus: Censored Classic and Contemporary Young Adult Novels

*The Contender* by Robert Lipsyte (1967)

*The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier (1974)

*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor  
(1976)

*Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)

*The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen  
Chbosky (1999)

*Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher (2001)

*Feed* by M.T. Anderson (2002)

*Looking for Alaska* by John Green (2005)

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*  
by Sherman Alexie (2007)

*Mexican WhiteBoy* by Matt de la Peña (2008)

inquiry (see the upcoming section entitled “Surveying the Literature”), I began to recognize a void within scholarship pertaining to characters with disabilities—the stories of real students who read and relate to these fictional characters.

With this gap in mind, I asked Siobhan if she would be willing to share her story alongside her examination of Junior’s experience in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. The end result is the forthcoming article that we hope will allow students and teachers alike to witness firsthand the importance of sharing stories as a central measure of rethinking “normal” and embracing differences.

## Beating the Odds

### Siobhan McIntyre

When I first read *The ALAN Review’s* call for manuscripts on the topic of rethinking “normal” and embracing differences, I felt particularly compelled to write an essay on the topic. For me, the language surrounding difference hit very close to home. I was born three months premature. Like Junior in Sher-

man Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, I, too, was supposed to “croak” (doctors told my mother I had a 50 percent chance of survival), but somehow, I beat the odds, and my only “differences” are a mild case of cerebral palsy and no peripheral vision. I was almost completely blind, but I had laser eye surgery shortly after I was born. I have been wearing glasses since the age of two. Unlike most people, I have never been able to run, jump, and climb, and I walk with a slight limp. Like Junior, I was bullied, especially in elementary and middle school. Kids picked on me for the way I walked and teased me about the thickness of my glasses. My left eye would wander, so people often asked sarcastically whether or not I was looking at them. As a child, this question frustrated me because I felt people regularly underestimated my abilities based solely on how they viewed my perceived disabilities. And it was not only my classmates; teachers sometimes marginalized me, as well.

When I was in first grade, my teacher called my mother to come to the school for a mandatory parent-teacher conference. The teacher, my mother, and the principal sat down in the administrative office to evaluate my performance. My mom told the teacher at the beginning of the school year that I had a visual impairment and needed to sit close to the blackboard. The teacher was convinced that I needed to be moved to the special education class because I “acted different,” “squinted my eyes,” and “read funny.” And then she used the word—a word that, even now, makes me cringe whenever I hear it, a word weighted with stigma, negativity, and shame. She asked my mother if I was retarded.

My mother, who was at this point extremely angry, carefully informed the teacher that no, I did not have an intellectual disability. As a matter of fact, I had taken an IQ test and scored 123 when I was four years old—seven points away from being able to join Mensa, a society for individuals whose IQ ranks in the top two percent of the population. At that same age, I had the vocabulary of a third grader. My mother saw my potential and nurtured it; she was determined not to let me be disadvantaged based on my differences. She worked together with the principal and my (very reluctant) teacher to draft a 504 plan to support my learning by providing me with extended time on tests and quizzes and moving my seat directly in front of overheads and blackboards. She fought for me and

taught me how to stand up for myself, both inside and outside of the classroom, and I am eternally grateful for her persistence.

I made straight A's from kindergarten to 12th grade, and many of the kids who bullied me are now my friends because they (and I) realized that a person should not judge a book by its cover. I think that is why *Junior* resonated with me so much. He was born with differences, and he acknowledges them. They are a part of who he is, but they do not define him. I believe that the definition of disability itself may connote a common misconception surrounding disabilities: you may *have* a disability, but the disability does not *have* you. *Junior* is bullied relentlessly, but he takes it all in stride, relating his experiences to readers in a way that allows him to laugh at his own pain. It is all about perspective, and *Junior's* perspective is very bright. He is witty, funny, expressive, and completely out-of-the-box. He embraces what makes him different, which is something I strive to do every day. I think everyone, especially adolescent and young adult readers, can learn a lot from taking a page out of *Junior's*—and *Alexie's*—book.

## Surveying the Literature

### Alan Brown

Inspired by Siobhan's own personal history with cerebral palsy and visual impairment, I conducted an investigation of the concepts of normalcy and disability in young adult literature and specifically *Alexie's The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Before Siobhan examines *Junior's* coming-of-age story, I would like to share what I learned. It is first important to note that the idea of sharing stories is not a new one, but it is more often connected with adolescent and young adult literature through engagement with multicultural literature (Baer & Glasgow, 2010; Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008; Lewis, 2014; Overall, 2014; and Stewart, 2015) and less often in scholarly writings related to texts that connect students' and characters' experiences with disability. For this reason, I provide an overview of the literature about disability before moving specifically to scholarship citing *Alexie's* story.

In a study of recent trends in young adult literature, Koss and Teale (2009) estimated that a quarter of the most popular young adult books from 1999 to

2005 included one or more characters with disabilities, which they suggest is much higher than anticipated. But what is characterized as a disability is an important question. Curwood (2013) broke down disabilities present in children's and young adult literature into categories of books that examine disability in general, learning disabilities, mental disabilities, developmental disabilities, dementia, visual impairments, and communication disorders. The benefit of novels that feature characters with disabilities is that many students can relate to them as they "learn to question society's apparent assumptions about disability, which they [may] have unconsciously applied to themselves" (Curwood,

2013, p. 85). More important, seeing a range of diverse characters in the books we read in English classes and/or find in the school library, including books featuring protagonists of color and protagonists with disabilities, allows students to recognize those characters not as adolescents set apart from their peers, but as equal members of their various communities.

Unfortunately, not all young adult novels that include characters with disabilities are viewed as realistic (e.g., books centered on the topic of visual impairment; see Carroll & Rosenblum, 2000). Furthermore, not all of these books portray characters with disabilities in an inclusive environment, and while that aspect may feel realistic, it can also create challenges for classroom teachers. Dunn (2015) cautions that while combining "high-quality disability-themed fiction" with responsible discussions and critical thinking can help students break down the "us/them dichotomy," discussions that lack "well-placed critical questions" can, in turn, serve to exacerbate existing stereotypes (p. 2). Yet the inclusion of adolescent and young adult literature featuring characters with disabilities may also provide many learning opportunities for teachers and students alike. As Curwood (2013) has suggested, inclusion literature can provide a chance for

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**I believe that the definition of disability itself may connote a common misconception surrounding disabilities: you may *have* a disability, but the disability does not *have* you.**

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students with disabilities [to] see their experiences represented, [so] all students can develop a richer understanding of what constitutes a disability and how it is often positioned in relation to the able-bodied norm. The integration of critical analysis and disability counternarratives in the classroom can also offer students a space to consider how their own lives are shaped by normalcy narratives. (p. 26)

As I think back on Siobhan's story about being teased and bullied, I am reminded, too, that characters with learning disabilities in adolescent and young adult literature are also commonly teased or bullied

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**Siobhan and I find Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* to be a worthwhile teaching tool—not only in the way the text describes Junior, a fictional character, but also in how Junior's life experience mirrors the childhood experience of author Sherman Alexie.**

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(Prater, 2003), and the same can likely be said of characters with physical disabilities. In describing Arnold Spirit, Jr. (a.k.a. Junior) from Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Haertling Thein and Sulzer (2015) point to a reality faced by countless students in schools across the country when it comes to bullying: “[Arnold] suggests that while his differences and disabilities were seen as ‘cute’ and acceptable in childhood, that acceptability ended in adolescence. Instead, ‘difference’ in adolescence spurs pack mentality, attacks on

weakness, and age-marked bullying tactics” (p. 51).

Ripley Crandall (2009) encourages teachers to challenge the status quo of the common educational experiences faced by many students (e.g., bullying) by teaching texts through a disability lens. Although his focus is on *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, he acknowledges that many classic texts may also be worthy of disability study and argues that “literature provides a window into how cultures create power dynamics and roles for its people—roles deserving challenging questions and rethinking” (Ripley Crandall, 2009, p. 76). Andrews (1998) adds that literature containing characters with disabilities—or what she refers to as inclusion literature—“can become a powerful tool for helping students without

disabilities develop an awareness of and tolerance for those with disabilities” (n.p.).

Siobhan and I find Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* to be a worthwhile teaching tool—not only in the way the text describes Junior, a fictional character, but also in how Junior's life experience mirrors the childhood experience of author Sherman Alexie. As a teacher of young adult literature, I believe students can relate to Junior's character for myriad reasons, including his outsider status at Reardan School, the loss of close family members, his romantic overtures with Penelope, and his struggle to gain confidence as a basketball player. And yet, perhaps the most teachable moment comes in the very first line of the book as Junior announces, “I was born with water on the brain” (Alexie, 2007, p. 1). Ripley Crandall (2009) best sums up what this statement means in describing Junior's experience with hydrocephalus:

Hydrocephalus, the condition Arnold had as a newborn, occurs when brain fluid is not reabsorbed into the circulatory system. In “normal” children, cerebrospinal fluid provides a layer of protection where the brain and spinal chord float, but in children born with hydrocephalus, the extra fluid causes an expansion of the head. This fluid pressure forces the brain against the bones of the skull and, in return, can destroy brain tissue. Eye coordination, motor skills, muscles, memory, social behavior, learning, judgment, and personality can be affected, depending on the location of the swelling fluid. (p. 72)

As Cline (2000/2001) explains, author Sherman Alexie was also born with hydrocephalus and underwent brain surgery at six months old. Doctors afforded him a limited chance of survival and noted that if he did survive, he would likely end up with a sustained mental impairment. “Yet,” says Cline (2000/2001), “Alexie did survive, with his mental faculties not only intact, but also quite advanced. He learned to read by age two, and was polishing off tomes like *The Grapes of Wrath* by kindergarten (though he only understood the last chapter)” (pp. 197–198). To lend further credibility to Junior's story, Alexie also knew what it was like to be bullied due to physical abnormalities, as he was “frequently mocked and ostracized by the other children, some of whom called him ‘The Globe’ because of his large head” (Grassian, 2005, p. 2). And like Junior, as well as Wake Forest University senior Siobhan McIntyre, “Alexie found refuge in books and in school . . . [and] he quickly learned the value of

humor both as a means of deflecting the abuse from other children and also as a means of personal empowerment” (Grassian, 2005, p. 2).

## Making Visible the Invisible

### Siobhan McIntyre

In school, we are taught that everyone is different in his or her own unique way and that we should treat everyone with respect. This statement may sound cliché, but it is not easily accomplished in a classroom setting, especially when working with students with disabilities. Oftentimes, teenagers see something on the outside of a person that they do not like or that they are surprised by, and they automatically assume that they will not like what is on the inside either. This is where another cliché comes in handy: do not judge a book by its cover. This saying especially rings true in Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.

Alexie’s protagonist, Arnold Spirit, Jr., is the poster boy for what it means to be different. He is a Spokane Indian who lives on a reservation (“rez” for short) and was born with excess cerebral spinal fluid on his skull, which he calls “brain grease” (Alexie, 2007, p. 1). In his own words, his brain grease is a result of the brain damage he suffered when “The doctors cut open my little skull and sucked out all that extra water with some tiny vacuum. . . . I ended up having forty-two teeth . . . . Ten more than usual. Ten teeth past human” (p. 2). He casually adds that he is nearsighted in one eye and farsighted in the other, joking that “My eyes are, like, enemies, you know, like they used to be married to each other but now hate each other’s guts,” and since the age of three, he has been wearing “ugly, thick, black, plastic” glasses that he says make him look like an “Indian grandpa” (p. 3). Junior calls attention to his flaws and shortcomings early in the text. Perhaps this is to pick on himself so that readers cannot do so themselves, even if those same readers cannot see him: “And, oh, I was skinny. I’d turn sideways and *disappear*. But my hands and feet were huge . . . . With my big feet and pencil body, I look like a capital L walking down the road” (p. 3).

At first, readers may wonder why Junior is ridiculing himself. Soon, however, they might realize that this mockery is his self-defense mechanism. He recalls, “My head was so big that little Indian

skulls orbited around it. Some of the kids called me Orbit. And other kids just called me Globe. The bullies would pick me up, spin me in circles, put their finger down on my skull, and say ‘I want to go there’” (Alexie, 2007, p. 4). The language Alexie uses in these lines and elsewhere is hilarious at first glance, but if we look closer, it is clear that Junior’s differences hurt him emotionally, even though he never explicitly says so. Junior uses humor to cope with life in general because not only does he have physical disabilities, he also has a troubling family history of alcoholism and is constantly surrounded by death. Junior often laughs to keep from crying, and his glass-half-full approach to life proves that laughter truly is the best medicine.

Another aspect that sets Junior apart from the crowd is his ability to draw. From the beginning, it is clear that drawing is Junior’s true passion. He says,

I draw all the time. . . . I draw because words are too unpredictable. I draw because words are too limited. If you speak and write in English, or Spanish, or Chinese, or any other language, then only a certain percentage of human beings will get your meaning. But when you draw a picture, everybody can understand it. . . . So I draw because . . . I want the world to pay attention to me. I feel important with a pen in my hand . . . the world is a series of broken dams and floods, and my cartoons are tiny little lifeboats. (p. 5)

Junior speaks with a stutter and a lisp, which makes him an even greater target for bullies, and although Alexie does not write the way Junior speaks, the pictures in the book say just as much as his words; pictures can speak a language all their own, depicting emotions that words would not be able to convey. Through images, we see the dynamic between Junior and his best friend, Rowdy, who is mean to him but who seems to be the only one to truly understand him. We also get a glimpse of how his family looks and acts as well as how he reacts to the deaths of his

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**In school, we are taught that everyone is different in his or her own unique way and that we should treat everyone with respect. This statement may sound cliché, but it is not easily accomplished in a classroom setting, especially when working with students with disabilities.**

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grandmother, sister, and his father's friend, Eugene. Junior transfers to Reardan after a heart-to-heart talk with his math teacher, Mr. P, at which time he decides to leave the reservation in hopes of getting a better education.

He is apprehensive because Reardan is "a hick town . . . filled with farmers and rednecks and racist cops who stop every Indian that drives through" (Alexie, 2007, p. 46). And he is more than a little intimidated when he arrives at Reardan and realizes that his physical disabilities will not be the only thing that sets him apart from the other students—the only other Indian at the school is the mascot. "Those kids weren't just white, they were translucent. . . . They stared at me like I was Bigfoot or a UFO" (p. 56). It certainly does not help that Junior is both Indian and poor. One of the most important drawings in the book shows a split image of a White boy with a "bright future" wearing a Ralph Lauren shirt, Timex wrist watch, Tommy Hilfiger khakis, and the latest Air Jordan shoes, standing next to Junior, an Indian with a "vanishing past" and dressed in a Kmart t-shirt, Sears blue jeans, and canvas tennis shoes while toting his books around in a Glad garbage bag (p. 57). This image encapsulates the essence of the book's title, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, as Junior tries to navigate two life-worlds while simultaneously developing his own identity.

Junior feels that he embraces his Indian identity only part of the time because he goes to an all-White school. He thinks he must abandon his Indian identity in exchange for a better life. He confides in us, the readers, and offers an inside look at the good, the bad, and the ugly of his life, his "absolutely true diary." The feelings that he shares, as well as the pictures he draws, clearly tell us that he does not want to abandon his Indian identity; he only wants a better version of it. When people look at Junior, he does not want them to see the kid with water on the brain who speaks differently and disappears when he turns sideways. He wants us to see him as a boy who is proudly Indian, one who is searching for hope when everything around him seems hopeless.

Junior wants us to read this book all the way through without skipping over any of the important parts, because his entire story is important. He gives us words, but the pictures he shares are just as important, if not more so; the images provide details that our imaginations may miss through textual reading. In a sense, the entire

novel is Junior's canvas because his drawings paint a picture of the world as he wants us to see it. Words tell us what was said, but pictures tell us what was *felt*. These pictures zero in on the experiences that significantly impact Junior's life. They refuse to sugarcoat or gloss over the rough patches of Junior's adolescence. And these images do not apologize for being real and true to Junior. This is the lesson the novel teaches young adult readers: in order to completely understand someone's truth, we must first attempt to see the world as he or she sees it, all parts of it, especially the parts that we, as readers, may not feel as comfortable viewing. When we force ourselves to see the bigger picture, it is easier to empathize with others' stories while simultaneously celebrating our own uniqueness. The ultimate goal of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is for its readers to learn how to walk a mile in someone else's shoes and to embrace the Arnold Spirit, Jr. that lies somewhere inside all of us.

## Embracing Differences

### Siobhan McIntyre and Alan Brown

The saying that reminds us not to judge a book by its cover may certainly be applied to the way *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* has been received in the literary world. As we circle back to the context of EDU 231 with its focus on censorship in schools and society, we find that this novel is censored or challenged in various settings, most likely due to its use of profanity and the ways in which it lays bare the harsh realities of alcoholism, bulimia, and death. Or perhaps censors struggle with the fact that Alexie overtly contrasts the plight of the poor Indian to the privileged, White American. It is a bold move, which is why this text is a vitally important part of the literary canon. The entire novel is about accepting differences and not pre-judging others. As Tara Anderson reminds us, Alexie's award-winning novel has the potential to "serve as a gateway for rich conversations about issues of diversity, poverty, pain, and racism in students' lives and in the United States" (see Brown, Mitchell, & Youngblood, 2014, p. 33).

We would like to add conversations about disability to that list. Junior is judged so harshly by society based on his disabilities that his wide range of abilities is often overlooked—and those abilities are exactly what should be celebrated. In fact, Junior stands as a



model to teach all students about the unyielding possibilities of overcoming even the most disproportionate odds as well as judging an entire book not only by its text, but also by its context—from the cover to the words to the images to the captions to the titles.

It is our hope that Alexie's novel will help change the way readers think about differences and disabilities and will encourage them to look beneath the surface. Teachers can help students understand that books, like people, are worth much more than face value. If we challenge ourselves to dig deeper, to turn the page and, at a minimum, read a person's table of contents, we can learn to consider the individual by the contents of their character and not just their appearance alone. If a picture is worth a thousand words, we must help students learn to view that picture by reading between the lines of the story. When they do, we may be pleasantly surprised to find students re-thinking "normal" and embracing the differences that so often divide them.

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## Finding His Voice and Capturing Hearts:

*Chatting with Novelist Vince Vawter*

**W**hen we first met Vince Vawter at the Tennessee Council of Teachers of English 2013 conference, we were struck by his graciousness and sincerity. He, author of the newly released novel *Paperboy* (2013), had agreed to serve as the luncheon keynote speaker. Vince took the stand, suffered through the introduction, complimented the pronunciation of his hometown (Louisville, Tennessee; the /s/ is pronounced), adjusted the microphone, and began to speak. He talked of the difficulties he experienced as a student with a speech impediment, of the long search to find his voice, and of the gratitude he felt for an English teacher who challenged him to move outside of his comfort zone. In a matter of mere minutes, Vince had moved beyond talking about his novel and writing; this veteran newspaper writer had captured the hearts of English teachers from across the state with his sincere and genuine words.

A few short months later, we received a brief, very modest announcement from Vince. His debut novel, *Paperboy* (2013), had been named a 2014 Newbery Honor book. His story, set in a segregated 1959 Memphis, allows the 11-year-old main character, Little Man, to find his voice. But more than this, perhaps, is that the writing of the story, beyond its accolades and reception by readers, allows the world to see that a speech impediment such as stuttering does not define who you are or what you may become.

Likely because of this very issue, Vince's voice resonates with all who meet him. Wanting to hear more about *Paperboy* (2013), Vince's writing, and his

issues with stuttering—and to share his responses with a larger audience—we asked if we might be able to interview him. He graciously agreed, and we presented questions pertaining to those topics and more to the Newbery Honor book winner. His responses are candid, heartfelt, and inspiring.

### ***Paperboy* Summary**

Vince Vawter's debut novel, *Paperboy* (2013), tells the story of Little Man (readers don't discover his name until the end) and his experiences over the course of one summer. In this coming-of-age tale set in segregated Memphis, Tennessee, during 1959, readers feel for Little Man and the difficulties he faces. With a very pronounced stutter, Little Man compensates by focusing on being the best baseball player he can be. When he takes on the responsibility of a paper route, Little Man is forced to face more than just his fear of speaking to strangers. He realizes as the summer unfolds that sometimes making a choice to take a stand for what is right may mean doing something that is wrong.

Vawter's tale presents civil rights issues—including violence, separation of Whites and Blacks on buses, and the abhorrence of the “N” word—through the eyes of an 11-year-old boy. His words and thoughts unfold through the s-s-s-s-s-stutters and through the typed words that he is unable to say. Told in a poignant manner, readers realize that relationships, regardless of skin color or blood ties, are founded on mutual respect, sacrifice, and love.

## The Conversation

**MC & KT:** You have a long history of newspaper journalism. What inspired you to write your first novel for young adults instead of a nonfiction piece?

**VV:** Mr. Spiro, one of the main characters in *Paperboy*, tells the young boy that more truth can be found in fiction than nonfiction, just as a painting can be more truthful than a photograph. I truly believe that. I think the best way to get at the story I wanted to tell was through autobiographical fiction.

**MC & KT:** Describe what you mean by autobiographical fiction.

**VV:** It's simply the merging of autobiographical and fictional elements in a story. Some call *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) a work of autobiographical fiction since many real people (Truman Capote, for example) can be identified as characters. Only one character in my novel does not come from my childhood.

**MC & KT:** Is the "housekeeper" in *Paperboy* based on a real person? If so, please describe the effect this relationship had on you as you wrote *Paperboy*.

**VV:** "Mam" is probably the character in the book that most resembles her real-life counterpart from my childhood. I loved her dearly and unconditionally when I was a child, and I finally got to explore that relationship further by writing my book. As an 11-year-old boy, I knew she was special without knowing why. I now know her to be one of the strongest and smartest women I have ever known.

**MC & KT:** Thinking about the civil unrest that characterized Memphis, Tennessee, during the 1950s and your relationship with your housekeeper, we noticed that you did not use racial terms that were historically accurate for that time period. Was this a deliberate omission? If so, what impacted your choice to avoid the derogatory but common terms of that time period?

**VV:** This was a struggle because I wanted my story to ring true, but I also spent 40 years of my life keep-

ing such derogatory words out of my newspapers. I finally arrived at a compromise that, in my opinion, portrayed the intensity and hate of the word without printing the word itself.

**MC & KT:** How has the culture, both Appalachian (East Tennessee, which you currently call home) and Southern (West Tennessee, where the novel is set), impacted your writing?

**VV:** Hemingway said you have to leave a place before you can write about it. I agree completely. It would stand to reason, then, that if I ever decided to write something with an Appalachian setting, I would have to move. Well, don't expect that Appalachian novel because I'm not leaving.

**MC & KT:** What books have most influenced your life?

**VV:** The first book I became hopelessly addicted to was *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812) by Johann David Wyss. I would finish reading the last page then turn to the front and start reading again. I started reading Hemingway as a sophomore in high school and have never overcome that addiction. I continue to reread him when I should be broadening my literary horizons.

**MC & KT:** Has your addiction to reading Hemingway influenced you as a writer? If so, how?

**VV:** Hemingway never wastes one word. When reading Hemingway, the reader gets the feeling that if one word was extracted, the entire story would come crashing down. I try to make every word, even a preposition, count.

**MC & KT:** Do you recall how your interest in writing originated?

**VV:** Just like the central character in *Paperboy*, I began banging on a typewriter when I was 8 or 9 years old. I loved to see the words I could not say come out of the ends of my fingers. There is a poem in *Paperboy* that is much like one I wrote when I was 10 or 11. I realize it's not a very good poem—then or now—but passion trumps talent.

**MC & KT:** Is there anything you find particularly challenging about writing?

**VV:** It's probably a good thing I started in newspapers because there was always a deadline at hand. I can spend hours fiddling with one turn of phrase or an issue of syntax or tone. I may be the slowest writer on the planet.

**MC & KT:** What phrase or syntax or tone led to fiddling while writing *Paperboy*?

**VV:** On page 58, there's a paragraph that begins: "No luck. The D sound stuck in my throat like . . . ." My first draft said something like "stuck in my throat with a thud." This never sounded right. I probably tried 15 or 20 different similes to convey that thought. Nothing sounded right. I gave up and took the phrase out. One day at a dog park, I saw a man throwing a tennis ball for his dog. He threw it hard, and it stuck in the fence. The dog was chewing on the ball trying to get it out. I almost jumped with excitement. I put the phrase down in my phone because I knew it was perfect. "The D sound stuck in my throat like a tennis ball in a chain-link fence."

**MC & KT:** Was it difficult moving from writing nonfiction, especially newspaper writing, into the realm of fictional writing?

**VV:** Extremely difficult. That's one reason it took me more than six years to write the book. Journalists "tell" rather than show. Novelists must "show." This is a seemingly simple phrase thrown about in many MFA courses, but the concept is more difficult. In my work, for instance, instead of repeatedly saying that Little Man was confused by his feelings for Mrs. Worthington, I tried to show that confusion.

**MC & KT:** What was the most difficult aspect of writing *Paperboy*?

**VV:** I had to pull off a lot of old scabs when I was writing *Paperboy*, so much so that my speech would suffer some at the end of a long day of writing. But that was

a small price to pay in order to have the chance to tell my story the way I wanted to.

**MC & KT:** Both you and your main character struggled with stuttering. Did/Do you view stuttering as a disability? Did others around you view it as a disability?

**VV:** In my view, stuttering is certainly a disability. At the height of the Vietnam War in 1967 and as badly as the country needed recruits, I was given a 4-F medical deferment due to my speech impediment. Others around me were generally confused by my speech since I had "good days" and "bad days" due to my reliance on covert stuttering and word substitution. My sense is that they thought—erroneously—that I could control my stutter, so they probably didn't view it as a disability per se.

**MC & KT:** Did your stuttering impact your learning or your grades in any way?

**VV:** Yes, very much so, but in a way that might not be readily apparent and one I didn't realize at the time. Besides the obvious issues of not speaking in class or taking part in group projects, I also chose to find my self-worth in athletics. I paid much more attention to sports than to my studies with the reasoning that the only way I could make it in the world was with my physical skills and not my verbal skills. I was the epitome of an "all-out jock" in high school. Everything seemed to be going fine until I got into college and realized I wasn't as good an athlete as I thought I was.

**MC & KT:** How did your teachers and classmates react to your stuttering?

**VV:** I don't want this to sound like sour grapes because this was the 1950s and speech pathology was nowhere close to where it is today. My teachers essentially ignored it by not challenging me and letting me slide. I was the prototypical elephant in the room. I had only one friend in whom I ever confided. You will recognize him in the book as the character named "Rat." I also think this is probably a "Southern thing." If one doesn't acknowl-

edge something or talk about it, then that means it doesn't exist. This is a very unhealthy attitude.

**MC & KT:** In your speeches, you talk about the influence of Chaucer and one of your English teachers. How did this teacher impact your life?

**VV:** My English teacher during my sophomore year in college required all her students to recite the prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1475/2003). I tried to get out of it, even calling on my baseball coach to intercede. I fought her every way I could, but she would not relent. It was a terrifying time for me, and I resented her mightily at the time, but looking back, it might have been the start of my long journey to finding my voice. I had given up on myself, but she refused to. It would have been easy for her to let me slide, but she challenged me. I will forever thank her.

**MC & KT:** How did living with what others might call a disability enhance your abilities in other areas, such as writing?

**VV:** More than once while speaking at schools, I have been asked if I thought I would have become a writer if I had not had a speech impediment. My answer is that I'm fairly confident I wouldn't have written *Paperboy*, and while I might have been a writer, my speech probably made me a better writer. For one thing, if you're not talking all the time, you tend to listen more—a good trait for a writer. Also, when I went into management later in my career, I think I had an increased empathy for employees who were struggling with various issues.

**MC & KT:** Is there a message in your novel that you want readers to grasp?

**VV:** Even though a person might not have a speech impediment, everyone needs to search for his or her own true voice. It has to do with honestly knowing yourself.

**MC & KT:** What advice do you have for young adult readers, especially those with disabilities, who are searching for their own true voice?

**VV:** I have been asked to speak at several speech pathology conventions where I usually share my 3-part Stuttering Manifesto. While it focuses on stuttering, I think it can be used for most issues young folks are facing. Here we go:

1. *Stuttering is what we do when we try NOT to stutter.* In trying to talk like everyone else, we create problems for ourselves. Search for your true self and voice, and be happy with it.
2. *Stuttering is not cured. It is overcome.* The first step in battling any issue is to admit the issue exists and to deal with it head on. Covert stuttering or covert behavior of any kind is deadly.
3. *Fluency is not all it's cracked up to be.* Few people, including highly compensated TV news anchors, approach even 90% clinical fluency. Don't worry about failing. Everyone does.

**MC & KT:** Winning a Newbery Honor is a huge experience. Describe the moment you found out and what you felt and thought.

**VV:** My agent called me on the Sunday before the Newbery books were to be announced on Monday. We chatted only briefly about it, and then I forgot about it completely. When the phone rang at 6:30 the next morning, I froze in bed. My wife started shouting for me to get up. I have always castigated winners of various awards (Oscars, Emmys, Golden Globes) on TV for their silly looks of astonishment. Never again.

**MC & KT:** What comes next? Do you have plans for a second novel? Are you currently working on anything in particular?

**VV:** *Paperboy* was written in obscurity and with only self-generated pressure. When I sit down to write now, I can feel the extra weight of a first novel. I continue to write, but I certainly can't make any promises. I've learned just enough about the fiction-writing process to be thoroughly mystified by it.

For more information about Vince Vawter and *Paperboy* (2013), please visit his website at <http://www.vincevawter.com>.

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## BOOK IN REVIEW: A TEACHING GUIDE

Toby **Emert**



# Of Birkenstocks and Chromosomes and Spiders Who Spell Well

*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/>.*

**“Y**ou’re wearing girl shoes,” my two-year-old niece announced disapprovingly, pointing to my Birkenstock sandals. It was the first thing she said to me after running into the yard to meet me as I opened the door of my car, having just finished a long drive to visit family on the Virginia farm where I grew up.

“Well,” I attempted to explain, “there aren’t really boy and girl shoes. Boys and girls can wear lots of kinds of shoes. These are sandals, and I bet even your daddy wears sandals sometimes.” Unconvinced, she shook her head “no.” She had only recently begun having fully developed conversations with adults; each day she demonstrated a growing vocabulary and an understanding of both semantics and syntax, but the rigid rules of acceptable gender performance had already been connoted to her. I expect that no one had explicitly told her that sandals were only worn by girls and women, but she had made the translation using information she had, internalizing the binary categorizations of gender (Dargie, Blair, Pukall, & Coyle, 2014, p. 60) with ease: apparel and footwear designate who are “boys” and who are “girls.” The culture—its images, its implicit expectations, its disapproval of variance from the “norm”—had instructed her about gender roles, and she was an apt learner.

In an article about gender role perceptions, Franklin Thompson and William Austin (2010) remind us that “gender role myths are promulgated from the day we are born” (p. 427). By the time students enter the kindergarten classroom, their acceptance of what Judith Butler (1990) labeled the “heterosexual matrix”—which defines our bodies in oppositional and hierarchical gender categories—is concretized, and historically, we have done little in schools to offer students opportunities to critique cultural beliefs about gender and sexual identity. Young adult literature offers us an opportunity to address that issue.

A little more than a decade ago, publishers began marketing a handful of selected YA titles that included gay and lesbian characters (Alex Sanchez’s (2001) *Rainbow Boys*, Julia Watts’s (2001) *Finding H. F.*, and Brent Hartinger’s (2003) *Geography Club*, for example, all appeared in the early 2000s), and as the appetite for more diverse stories has grown, so has the number of YA offerings that feature queer and questioning characters. The percentage of titles published each season is still miniscule, however, when compared to the total number of YA books—less than 2% of the more than 3,000 books published each year (YALSA, 2012).

In this column, I spotlight four novels that tackle gender and sexuality issues directly. All of the books were finalists for the Lambda Literary Award (<http://www.lambdaliterary.org/>), given to authors and books that feature queer characters and storylines. And two have won the American Library Association’s (ALA) Stonewall Book Award (<http://www.ala.org/glbtrt/award>), which first appeared in 1971

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**Bringing these diverse stories into the classroom has the potential to broaden and brighten students' understandings of human expression of identity and to encourage them to question their own cultural assumptions, as well as promote a sense of empathy.**

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and honors exceptional merit in writing related to the queer experience. Revealing, however, is the fact that it was not until 2012 that the ALA added the Children's and Young Adult Literature Awards to its list of categories. The novels I have selected for the column include characters with a range of gender and sexual identities—lesbian, questioning, transsexual, gender-nonconforming, and intersex—and settings—from the American Midwest to the Middle East. Bringing these diverse stories into the classroom has the potential

to broaden and brighten students' understandings of human expression of identity and to encourage them to question their own cultural assumptions, as well as promote a sense of empathy.

### **Award-winning YA Novels with Queer and Questioning Characters**

#### ***None of the Above* (Lambda Literary Award Finalist, 2016)**

On her blog (<http://www.iwgregorio.com>), I. W. Gregorio describes her debut young adult novel, *None of the Above* (2015), as “*Middlesex* meets *Mean Girls*.” Gregorio, a urologist by day and writer by night, based the story of her protagonist, Kristin Lattimer—a popular high school athlete whose life seems perfect until she discovers she is intersex ([http://www.isna.org/faq/what\\_is\\_intersex](http://www.isna.org/faq/what_is_intersex))—on one of the patients she treated during her medical residency. Like Kristin, Gregorio's patient did not learn that she had Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS) ([http://www.aissg.org/21\\_OVERVIEW.HTM](http://www.aissg.org/21_OVERVIEW.HTM)) until she was a teenager. AIS, a genetic condition that causes individuals to have XY chromosomes (the biological designation for “male”), results in the development of male internal organs (such as testicles), but physical development is not affected by the testosterone, so the individual “appears” female.

Gregorio tells a compelling story about identity, family, romance, and acceptance while educating readers about intersex individuals. This is not an easy task, and generally, I would argue that well-written novels do not attempt to teach readers about a topic or issue, but in the case of intersex, which has a range of biological manifestations and has historically been the cause of unnecessary medical interventions, such as surgeries to “correct” the condition, there is a great deal to understand, and informed stories are scarce. Of all the books I read last year, *None of the Above* felt perhaps the most important in terms of offering a narrative that sensitively explores the concepts of gender and sexuality in a way that demands that readers question the categories we have culturally delineated for identifying ourselves and others.

#### ***George* (Lambda Literary Award Finalist, 2016; Stonewall Book Award, 2016)**

The charming and conceptually sophisticated debut novel *George* (2015) from genderqueer writer Alex Gino recently received the Stonewall Award (<http://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2016/01/2016-stonewall-book-awards-announced>) and has garnered international attention for its perceptive portrayal of a transgender fourth grader, Melissa, whom the world sees as a boy named George. Melissa wants desperately to play Charlotte in her class production of *Charlotte's Web*, and she and her best friend Kelly spend hours practicing the lines in the play. When her teacher holds the auditions, however, she reprimands Melissa (whom the teacher sees as George) for wanting to play a part written for a “girl.” Melissa is heartbroken when she is not cast as Charlotte, but she joins the stage crew. Ultimately, Kelly (who captured the Charlotte role) and Melissa hatch a scheme that allows Melissa to show everyone, including her parents, who she is. Gino deftly renders Melissa as a dynamic and likeable character who understands her own gender identity and simply needs a vehicle for helping others understand as well.

Gino (who prefers the gender-neutral singular personal pronoun *they*) says they have been working on the story that became *George* since 2003 and credits research, timing, and luck with the publication of the novel—one of only a tiny handful of middle grade novels that feature a transgender character. What makes *George* such a compelling novel, though, is not the fact that it portrays a transgender child; it is



that the portrayal is so deftly handled, and the narrative is so well constructed. Gino succeeds in bringing readers a timely story that also has the potential to endear them to the protagonist in much the same way that generations of readers have been endeared to the unexpectedly intelligent spider Charlotte—who, like Melissa, is a “radiant” character.

***If You Could Be Mine* (Lambda Literary Award, 2014)**

Sara Farizan, the daughter of Iranian immigrants, sets her first novel *If You Could Be Mine* (2013) in openly repressive Iran, where 17-year-old Sahar and her best friend Nasrin have been in love since they were both six. In Iran, however, the girls could be imprisoned, or possibly even executed, if their relationship is discovered. So, they keep their feelings for each other secret. The complications increase when Nasrin’s parents arrange her marriage to a wealthy doctor. The announcement causes Sahar to contemplate the possibility of gender reassignment surgery, which is legal in Iran and more culturally acceptable than a same-sex relationship; it would allow her, as a man, to marry Nasrin. Sahar does not identify as “trans,” but she is desperate and determined.

Farizan convincingly explores the underculture of queer life in Tehran, though she grew up in the US and describes herself as a “Westerner.” She explains in an interview with *Mother Jones* (<http://www.motherjones.com/media/2014/10/sara-farizan-you-could-be-mine-tell-me-again-how-crush-should-feel>) that in writing the novel, it was important for her as a member of the LGBTQ community to imagine what it would be like growing up in the country her parents are from. In doing so, she offers readers a story that explores the idea of same-sex attraction (a concept at least familiar to Western readers) in the unfamiliar setting of the Middle East. Farizan successfully conveys both the beautiful and the disturbing aspects of a culture that is, at once, progressive and repressive.

***Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (Lambda Literary Award Finalist, 2013; Stonewall Book Award, 2014)**

Kirstin Cronn-Mills is a self-proclaimed Nebraska-born word nerd and soccer mom who now lives in Minnesota with her husband and son. She sets her second YA novel, *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012), in suburbia in southern Minnesota where Gabe Williams

is learning to live as a “guy” after 18 years of living as Elizabeth. Gabe is a music fiend and feels lucky to land a summer gig as a DJ hosting a show on community radio; he calls the show “Beautiful Music for Ugly Children” and quickly develops a small but loyal fan club of listeners. In his DJ role, Gabe finds the freedom to be himself. He also finds a supportive music mentor and friend in his 70-year-old neighbor, John, who works at the station. Call-in requests for Gabe’s radio show help him develop relationships with some of his fans, but being known publicly also complicates his transition when he is outed and threatened.

Critics have noted Cronn-Mills’s ability to tell a nuanced first-person story about a transgender character. She makes Gabe’s concerns about his family, his friends, and his romantic life not only believable, but understandable. *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* joins the short list of young adult novels that explore transgender issues, including Julie Anne Peters’s *Luna* (2004) and Ellen Wittlinger’s *Parrotfish* (2007), but Cronn-Mills is especially successful in exploring the emotional territory of transitioning without relying heavily on stereotypes about gender and identity. Gabe is a flawed and interesting character that readers will like and root for.

The four books reviewed here offer a sampling of the best recently published writing for young adults that explores gender and sexuality, and any of these novels would offer teachers opportunities to discuss rich character development, setting, complex plotting, narrative structure, rhetorical aims, and thematics. They also have the potential to invite conversations about the construction of identity, cultural bias, changing social attitudes, and national and international policies and laws that govern personal expression.

## **In the Classroom: Priming for Critical Conversations**

Many English teachers “identify discussion as the heart of their approach to teaching literature” (Kahn, 2007, p. 16), and we can all likely recall classroom moments when students entered into conversations about important topics, spurred by a text the class was reading together. Engagement in authentic discussion results in a deeper comprehension of the ideas embedded in the literature we ask students to read (Kahn,

2007, p. 16), but guiding our classes to thoughtful dialogue can be daunting work. “Despite our high hopes, discussions [can] often flounder, marked by awkward silences . . . and superficial comments” (Bruss, 2009, p. 28). In terms of their social development, adolescents are experiencing what Giordano, Longmore,

and Manning (2006) refer to as the “crossing-over process,” which involves negotiating the terrain of romance and attraction (p. 265), so they are naturally interested in discussing gender and sexuality. However, the complex nature of these kinds of conversations requires explicit frameworks that support students as they develop substantive discussions.

As they are learning to modify the tone of their comments to promote classroom discourse that aims to be both an exploration and a critique of the ideas in novels like *George*, *None of the Above*, *If You Were Mine*, or *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children*,

students benefit from learning activities that are both invitational and structured. Otherwise, teachers run the risk of reinforcing stereotypical thinking and language, which hinders the objective of increasing empathy and understanding. In fact, when classroom discussions of sensitive topics are not managed well, students commonly just parrot the negative cultural messaging they have been subject to regarding gender and sexuality, and they fail to critically examine the text they are reading or their own ideas. The strategies described here can assist teachers as they engage students in sensitive and sensible discussions.

### Activity I: The ABC Taxonomy

In *Writing as Learning: A Content-based Approach*, Rothstein, Rothstein, and Lauber (2007) describe a variety of instructional activities that support students as they develop their abilities to think, create, com-

municate, and interact with texts (p. 3). Their pre-reading strategy, the ABC Taxonomy, is especially apt for priming students for conversations about gender and sexuality, as it invites students to inventory the vocabulary they have already developed about these concepts (honoring what they know) and sets up a system for adding new terminology they may encounter as they read and discuss.

The ABC Taxonomy is a multi-phased strategy that involves self-reflection, work with a partner, and the creation of a dynamic class “dictionary” of terms related specifically to the topic of a lesson or unit. Here is how the strategy could work for a lesson that prepares students to read one of the novels highlighted in this column. Students first create a working document in their notebooks, titled “Taxonomy of Words Associated with Gender and Sexuality.” The document simply lists the letters of the alphabet on every other line to allow space for alphabetized terms to be added. After they have created the taxonomy organizer, students work individually for approximately five minutes to brainstorm as many terms as possible, alphabetizing as they generate the words (or phrases).

Then the students work with a partner to add more terms to the taxonomy. Ultimately, the teacher invites the entire class to contribute terms to a shared taxonomy that can become a reference for vocabulary to be explored in a lesson or a unit; it can also serve as a dynamic class document that grows as the class acquires new vocabulary through reading and discussion. It is likely that in building the class taxonomy, the students (and perhaps the teacher) will encounter new terms, as well as familiar ones. The taxonomy, then, offers opportunities for the teacher to engage students in discussions of the language we use to specify gender and describe sexuality. By naming these words, we “sanction” their use and provide students a working vocabulary for class discussions.

This prereading strategy also “normalizes” the terminology used in discussing a text that features narratives of gender exploration, fluid gender, gender roles, gender identity, sexual identity, sexism, and heterosexism and allows the class to examine how words have power to describe and explain, as well as to elevate and denigrate. In the brainstorming session, a teacher might encourage students to include all of the words they know, but in creating the class document, the teacher has an opportunity to help the class

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**[W]hen classroom discussions of sensitive topics are not managed well, students commonly just parrot the negative cultural messaging they have been subject to regarding gender and sexuality, and they fail to critically examine the text they are reading or their own ideas.**

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select the vocabulary that seems most appropriate for classroom discourse. This method of engaging the students actively in constructing a class dictionary avoids the less-helpful lecture about appropriate classroom language; instead, it spotlights vocabulary, opens a conversation about language use, and previews the ideas that students will encounter as they read a text that addresses gender and sexuality.

### Activity II: List, Group, Label

Another vocabulary activity that prepares students for an interaction with a “sensitive” text is List, Group, Label, a “strategy for stimulating inductive thinking about elements of a unit of study before beginning the unit” (Nessel & Graham, 2007, p. 127). Inductive thinking involves making generalizations based on specific details. In this activity, the teacher organizes the students into pairs or small groups and provides each with a preselected list of 25–30 words that are related to the unit (this is the “list” element of the strategy). The words can be written on individual small cards for easy manipulation and arrangement. Each group of students receives a set of the cards and is asked simply to organize the words into categories (the “group” element of the strategy) and then to generate a label for each category. Students do not need to know the meanings of the words; they are simply encouraged to do their best thinking about how the words might be categorized. After the students have organized their lists, the teacher can have them speculate about the topic of the text the class will be reading. They can also discuss their rationales for organizing the words and creating labels for their categories; it is helpful to have groups compare their processes and final results.

This strategy can also be extended as the reading progresses. For example, after reading and discussing the text, the students return to their original lists and revise them to reflect their current thinking about the words, given the information they gleaned from the text. Con-

structivist researchers such as Hilda Taba and Jerome Bruner “recognized that instruction is particularly effective when students are encouraged to use what they know to generate tentative meanings that they can revise as they learn more” (Nessel & Graham, 2007, p. 127). This kind of prereading activity builds anticipation and interest and previews concepts that are important to understanding a text generally, but it can be particularly helpful to prepare students for the study of a novel that addresses what are often considered taboo topics for the classroom.

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**This activity highlights the important distinctions between the concepts of gender and sexuality, which are too often conflated and may be confusing to students.**

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### Activity III: Double Bubble Map

David Hyerle (2009) has developed a useful visual system for designating eight distinct cognitive functions in his work on Thinking Maps ([http://dft.designsforthinking.com/?page\\_id=17](http://dft.designsforthinking.com/?page_id=17)), and his map for comparing and contrasting, the Double Bubble Map, is an appropriate tool for helping students prepare to read a novel that addresses gender and sexuality (see Fig. 1). Hyerle suggests that “comparing and

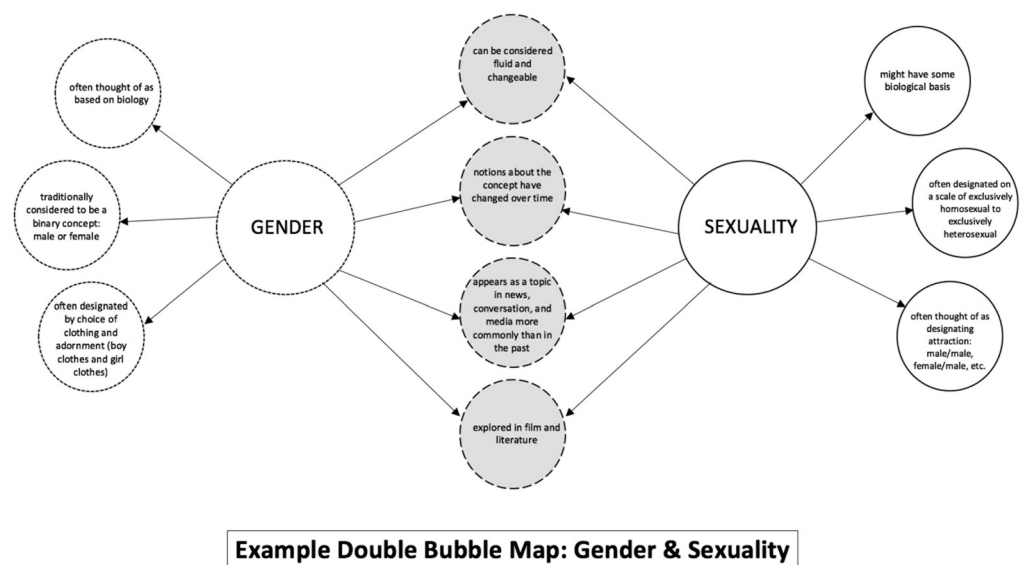


Figure 1.

contrasting is most easily accomplished by students when they graphically detail similarities of and differences between two concepts rather than only verbalizing their thinking” (2009, p. 22). For this activity, students can work in pairs or small groups to examine the terms *gender* and *sexuality*.

The mapping begins by writing the two words

on opposite sides of a large sheet of paper and then drawing a circle (the bubble) around each word. Then students list the unique characteristics of gender in bubbles that lie to the left of that term and the characteristics of sexuality to the right of that term on the map. Between the two words, the students list characteristics that both concepts share.

After they draft together,

the students then create a polished final version of the map that designates the similarities and differences with color coding. For example, the word *gender* and its particular qualities could be red, the word *sexuality* and its particular qualities could be blue, and the similarities could be purple. The color designations reinforce the information the map displays. This activity highlights the important distinctions between the concepts of gender and sexuality, which are too often conflated and may be confusing to students. It also prepares the class for interaction with a novel that features characters that do not represent expected gender norms.

#### **Activity IV: Literature Circle Discussions**

Literature Circles, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same book together, have been popular in ELA classrooms for at least two decades and have a solid research base to indicate their effectiveness in promoting engagement and comprehension (Daniels, 2002). This model for discussion can work especially well when students are reading “controversial” texts, as the groups are small, self-managed, and explicitly structured. Students prepare in advance for the discussions by playing a series of reader roles, including discussion director, illustrator,

word watcher, passage collector, and summarizer. The roles can vary, but each student has the opportunity to read closely, think specifically about certain aspects of the text, and prepare notes that inform the discussions.

The format of this mode of discussion allows for flexibility on the part of the teacher in assigning texts to read and invites students to choose a text that seems especially interesting. For example, a teacher might design a unit with a theme that relates to aspects of gender and sexuality, and as part of the unit may ask the students to form a Literature Circle around one of the four novels that appear in this column (which represent a range of reading levels, characterizations of gender variance, author backstories, and cultural information). It is common for teachers to share a book talk about each of the novels the students may select as a way of assisting the students in choosing the book that seems most appealing.

Shelby Jones, an English teacher in metro-Atlanta, regularly uses Literature Circles in her classroom, but she says that she finds them especially helpful in providing a safe space for conversations about issues of gender and sexuality because they require students to process their ideas about the text as they play their assigned roles *before* they enter a discussion with their classmates (Emert, 2016, p. 258). This kind of pre-discussion preparation encourages more reasoned and considerate responses to characters and ideas that might seem difficult to understand or identify with. Karen Schlick Noe, a professor in the College of Education at Seattle University and author of several books on Literature Circles, has created a website, the Literature Circles Resource Center (<http://litcircles.org/>), that is especially useful for anyone trying the strategy for the first time, but is also helpful for those who use Literature Circles regularly, as the site includes research, links to resources, and example units.

## **Conclusion**

In an article that appeared in *The ALAN Review* in 2008, “Creating Space for YAL with LGBT Content in Our Personal Reading,” Katherine Mason points out that adolescent literature is “a source of both information and validation” (p. 55). The novels included in this column easily serve these purposes, bringing students stories of gender-nonconforming characters

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**This kind of pre-discussion preparation encourages more reasoned and considerate responses to characters and ideas that might seem difficult to understand or identify with.**

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who are learning about themselves and seeking self-acceptance and social validation. Cronn-Mills, Farizan, Gino, and Gregorio also offer rich narratives that spur reflection, invite questions, and open the door to discussions that belong in the English classroom, where students examine their own developing identities in relationship to the characters and situations they find in the texts they read.

My niece—now in high school—and her peers live in a charged macro-culture where media saturation makes it impossible to avoid encountering misrepresentative images, crass innuendo, and insensitive gender stereotypes. Without invitations from teachers to discuss issues within the context of a critically engaged classroom, however, it is entirely possible for her to misunderstand how intolerance and intransigence color our perceptions of norms. The culture has an agenda, and it will offer her instruction, just as it taught her about “boy shoes” and “girl shoes.” Young adult literature is beginning to provide us with stories that interrogate our assumptions about identity. It is up to those of us in classrooms to accept the challenge these stories offer. Deconstructing stereotypes benefits all students, regardless of where they see themselves on the spectrum of gender and sexual identities, and well-told stories have the power to touch us, inspire us to think critically, and alter our perspectives about the world and ourselves.

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## RIGHT TO READ

Robert **Bittner**  
with  
Angel Daniel **Matos**



# Fear of the Other:

Exploring the Ties between Gender, Sexuality, and Self-Censorship in the Classroom

*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/>.*

**T**his issue of *The ALAN Review*, broadly speaking, considers the role of “the normal” in young adult literature. Young adult literature possesses the potential to push readers—young and old—to think critically about alternate ways of being and existing in the world. While we have seen the development of exciting literature that represents new and unprecedented ways of thinking about race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, and nationality, we have also seen a rise of authority figures, institutions, and readers who attempt to control and limit access to these narratives.

This is especially true when considering how much discussion of trigger warnings and other forms of self-censorship has proliferated in our contemporary milieu. After all, it was only last year that a group of students at Duke protested the placement of Alison Bechdel’s (2006) *Fun Home* on the advanced summer reading list on the grounds of the graphic novel being “pornographic.” As a scholar and an educator of queer young adult fiction (and editor of this column), I cannot help but wonder if any of my students might react similarly to some of the novels that I assign. Would they, for instance, refuse to read a queer young adult novel due to its depiction of sexuality or its explicit sexual content? If so, I wonder, how can students

think critically about a queer novel’s political stance on sexuality if they refuse to read it? Even more so, could I get into trouble for assigning such a novel to my students in the first place?

These concerns are addressed in this edition of “Right to Read,” where I have asked my friend and colleague Robert Bittner to share his perspectives and research on the complicated enmeshment of identity, censorship, and young adult literature. In particular, Robert and I discussed the possibility of focusing this column on the responsibilities that educators and librarians have in proliferating narratives that will assist young readers to challenge normativity in contemporary society. Robert is an expert on LGBTQ young adult literature who has taught courses at the university level, served on various literary awards committees (including the 2016 Michael L. Printz Award), and worked closely with the American Library Association, thus enabling him to share a unique perspective on identity and censorship in young adult texts. In the following column, he shares a compelling discussion that asks readers to think carefully about the ethical and cultural issues that arise during acts of self-censorship in our professional practices. Robert not only paints a portrait of the broad issues of gender and sexual identity that lead librarians, teachers, and scholars to engage in acts of self-censorship, he also makes a persuasive imploration for us to let young readers know that texts with emancipatory and groundbreaking representations of sexual and gender identity *do* exist.

## Censorship and “Normal”: Aren’t They Mutually Exclusive?

Robert Bittner

“It’s sort of a soft, quiet, very insidious censorship, where nobody is raising a stink, nobody is complaining, nobody is burning books. [. . .] They’re just quietly making sure it doesn’t get out there [says Barry Lyga].”

—Whelan, 2009, *n.p.*

I have been working with topics related to censorship for a number of years. I have kept tabs on the banning and challenging of picturebooks and young adult (YA) fiction throughout various institutions in North America, and one thing remains constant in all of these instances: people often threaten the right of young people to read books that are challenging and culturally relevant. Reasons range from keeping children innocent to finger-pointing at various sociopolitical institutions for attempting to advance a “nefarious agenda.” Much of my research on specific instances of book challenges in North America draws from second-hand stories and other sources, such as the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF). Having recently started teaching literature for undergraduate students, topics of censorship suddenly became real and close to home. I am glad to say that my choices for literature and other forms of media have not been challenged as of yet, but I understand that I am likely to encounter resistance at some point in the future. But why does this type of resistance feel inevitable? Should censorship in any form be considered a “normal” part of the process of education?

The purpose of this column is to consider approaches to the “normal,” particularly as they relate to justifications for acts of censorship. Unfortunately, fear is becoming a habitual part of education, whether it be in primary, secondary, or post-secondary educational institutions. In various fields of study in the humanities and social sciences, students, staff, administrators, and other faculty members regularly question the selection of secondary sources, such as fiction, film, biography, or images of any kind. While designing my first Introduction to Sexuality Studies course in 2015, I was struck by how often I ended

up thinking to myself, “Will this material get me in trouble?” And then I would think, “But I’m supposed to be expanding students’ minds and their faculties of critical thought/reasoning. Why is fear of retaliation making such a large impact on my media and literature choices?” Regrettably, we now live in an educational culture of fear. I am not one to simplistically blame movements aimed at helping vulnerable individuals, but trigger warnings and self-censorship are powerful and terrifying concepts that are responsible for shaping curricula and causing teachers to pull their punches out of fear of parental, student, or administrative retaliation.

I realize that this is a rather broad discussion, and so for this particular column, I focus on self-censorship<sup>1</sup> in the classroom and connections to non-normative gender and sexual identities in YA literature, both fiction and nonfiction.

## Gender Policing, Sexuality, and Self-Censorship

In a cultural moment brimming with discussions of insider/outsider authorship and racial disparity in literature as well as moments often overshadowed by fear around how to approach contentious situations—the potentially triggering, the unknown—teachers are often left in a difficult position of deciding what is appropriate to teach without incurring the wrath of parents and administrators. Unfortunately, the very institutions of education that we inhabit as teachers are not exactly open to examinations of the Other. As McEntarfer (2016) notes in *Navigating Gender and Sexuality in the Classroom*, “Far from being neutral, schools actively reproduce dominant gender norms” (p. 7). She adds that “teacher candidates must be encouraged to think critically about that role and to consider how they can disrupt those norms and the systems that create them” (p. 7). The institution itself is so entrenched in a binary understanding of “normal” when it comes to gender and sexuality (male/

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female, queer/straight) that undermining these assumptions can only occur through proactive education on such topics and through the inclusion of non-normative gender and sexual representations earlier on in the education process.

This is easier said than done, as the culture of fear produced through gender policing of “safe” spaces often discourages teachers from engaging in the controversial nature of such situations. Fear and anger associated with public, over-policed spaces

such as bathrooms and locker rooms are all the more explosive in school spaces where some believe that anything outside the norm disrupts learning and “normal” development. The fact that simple acts such as going to the restroom or changing for gym class can cause legal battles, physical violence, community disruption, and other similar reactions creates a landscape of fear in school spaces. In 2013, Jody Herman of The Williams Institute out of UCLA released a study noting that “roughly 70% of trans people have reported being denied entrance, assaulted or harassed while trying to use a restroom.” In November of 2015, a transgender student in Oregon filed a lawsuit just to be able to

use the locker room that he feels matches his gender identity and expression (Parks, 2015). There are many instances of legal battles around the right of trans youth and adults to use gender-specific restrooms and locker rooms, and this type of everyday discrimination should make one pause and consider ways in which we, as educators, treat gender within institutional settings. Classrooms are especially vulnerable spaces due to stringent policing of content in curricula by parents, school boards, and conservative groups.

Further complicating this situation is the lack of education for students and new and practicing teachers as well as the lack of understanding at higher administrative levels; the result is that schools remain hotbeds of homophobia and transphobia. Children and youth learn about social norms in classrooms. If non-normative genders and sexualities are continually avoided or erased in curricula, young people may continue to see gender variant and non-heteronormative identities as aberrant, dangerous, and/or predatory. In such a climate, not only do bullies learn that they will unlikely see any consequences for their actions, but those who do feel “different” will unlikely feel comfortable being themselves within classroom situations. According to Haskell and Burtch (2010), “Children learn early on that violating gender norms can result in stigmatization, hostility and isolation” (p. 30). What is needed, they say, is education on gendered difference. What better way to do that than in the classroom using fiction—*I am J* (Beam, 2011), *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (Cronn-Mills, 2012), *George* (Gino, 2015), and *If I Was Your Girl* (Russo, 2016)—or nonfiction/memoir—*Some Assembly Required* (Andrews, 2014) or *Rethinking Normal* (Hill, 2014)?

Within the current North American cultural climate of fear and given repeated unwillingness to celebrate diversity of gender and sexuality, the YA novel is possibly one of the most effective complementary sources of information related to tolerance, navigating queer/trans life, and gender and sexual diversity—both for trans/queer teens who wish to find books they can relate to and for non-queer/trans teens who wish to see depictions of what their peers experience in life. A significant barrier to using YA works is the fear around bringing such texts directly into any formal curricula, which means teachers need to get creative about how to expose students to such materials. Perhaps this can be achieved by creating a classroom library or verbally suggesting recommended texts when teaching certain topics. Or school librarians might add gender-diverse titles to book displays that encourage students to pick up certain titles, such as those noted earlier. Further strategies for engaging critically with texts in the classroom can be found in Sanders and Mathis’s (2013) *Gay and Lesbian Literature in the Classroom*, in which the authors encourage teachers to find texts where LGBT themes saturate the

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narrative so they are unable to be extracted or ignored in classroom discussion (pp. 1–2). The argument put forth by these scholars is that the inclusion of such texts can help to counter the heteronormative trajectory of so much secondary education in North America currently.

The acknowledgement or discussion of consequences related to homophobic and/or transphobic bullying can give a new perspective to those guilty of such bullying. This is essential, as “[e]nabling students to construct positive sexual and gender identities requires that transphobia and homophobia be acknowledged and addressed in the thick of conflict in high schools” (Haskell & Burtch, 2010, p. 11). Education about stereotypes and the dangers of assumptions is also necessary, as such attitudes only lead to more fear, misunderstanding, and false accusation:

Persistent, negative stereotypes about the sexual promiscuity of LGBTQ people may lead students to be wary of others they “suspect” of being queer in change rooms. Stereotypes equating sexual predation and homosexuality cause people to fear victimization unnecessarily and to police spaces where they feel vulnerable. Lack of adult oversight can increase feelings of vulnerability. (Haskell & Burtch, 2010, p. 39)

While this previous passage provides a relatively practical discussion about bullying and other actionable situations taking place in schools, the place of censorship of literary materials should not be forgotten or misunderstood. According to the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, one of the main reasons for books to be challenged or banned in institutions throughout North America is the inclusion of “homosexuality” and “sexually explicit” content. How does this relate to my previous discussion of gender, gendered assumptions, and homophobic/transphobic bullying? Gendered behaviors are often conflated with sexuality, as “People make stereotypical assumptions about one’s sexuality based on gender expression. . . . Gender plays a large role in what is often deemed homophobic harassment, and these events are not just about sexual orientation; discomfort with gender nonconformity is also likely a factor” (Haskell & Burtch, 2010, p. 13).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (2004) “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay” brings to light some of the troubling reasons why societies struggle to allow children to express non-normative gender identities. The defini-

tion of gender identity disorder of childhood<sup>2</sup> assumes that there is something inherently female (or at least not male) about dressing or acting a certain way. I bring this up to give a concrete explanation for why there is such fear around certain types of gendered behaviors, emphasizing the need for increased education on the subject. Psychologically and culturally speaking, these assumptions mean that a boy only needs to desire wearing a dress to be suddenly considered strange at best and suffering from a

psychological disorder at worst. A boy’s desire to wear a dress or a girl’s desire to wear her hair in a “boy” cut go against the grain of normative benchmarks of development. Because these benchmarks have become so integral in North American society, any form of opposition to regulatory assumptions of development is met with fear and suspicion, and schools are rife with such fears. Gender and sexuality are conflated, giving a false impression to adults who fear that homosexuality is being pushed on their teens and children. Gender expression gets easily associated with sexual identity, thus causing unnecessary concern from peers and adults. That being said, one need only pick up *Parrotfish* (Wittlinger, 2007), *I Am J* (Beam, 2011), or any number of YA texts with trans or gender-nonconforming themes to see that this conflation is refuted routinely in youth literature.

I am hopeful that within the next decade or so, the findings of professionals in the medical and psychology communities will trickle down to the general population. In time, society at large will ideally internalize the difference between gender and sexuality, helping to eliminate, or at least reduce, panic in those who currently fear non-normative gender expression. Until such time as these topics become cultural “commonsense” knowledge, however, we are at least beginning to see the emergence of queer texts for young people in the form of transgender and genderqueer fictional and nonfictional protagonists. These representations can (and should) be used in classrooms, or should at least be made available for young people to

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**[A] boy only needs to desire wearing a dress to be suddenly considered strange at best and suffering from a psychological disorder at worst.**

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access within classroom or school libraries in order to expand their understanding of contemporary perspectives on gender and sexuality.

## Queer Texts and Non-normative Representations

As can be expected, queer texts are the very texts that are often subject to challenges and larger acts of censorship. The children's book *10,000 Dresses*,

written by Marcus Ewert (2008) and illustrated by Rex Ray, for instance, "has been challenged by some socially conservative organizations for its depiction of a male-bodied child who wears dresses and who the narrative refers to with female pronouns. In 2011 the book was banned in Texas schools" (NCAC, 2014). Granted, this is a children's book, and many concerns are directly related to young children, especially where almost any talk of non-normative gender and sexuality is met with panic, but even YA books with gender nonconforming protagonists have been challenged officially with increasing frequency. In 2004, Julie Anne Peters's book *Luna* (2004)—one of the first YA

novels to feature an explicitly trans character—was challenged by Audie Murphy Middle School (ACLU, 2006). These are not universal cases, and, perhaps more importantly, are not indicative of the more insidious instances of self-censorship that occur much more commonly but in a much less publicly acknowledged way.

The very concept of self-censorship is a tricky thing. There is a fine line between what some consider common sense, what others find to be simple consideration for those who are a little more sensitive, and

what still others consider a form of censorship that keeps educational opportunities hidden from students. Some even go so far as to deny that self-censorship exists as a concept. Debra Lau Whelan (2009), writing for *School Library Journal*, discusses the devious nature of self-censorship and its often denied existence in school and library professions:

Self-censorship. It's a dirty secret that no one in the profession wants to talk about or admit practicing. Yet everyone knows some librarians [and teachers] bypass good books—those with literary merit or that fill a need in their collections. The reasons range from a book's sexual content and gay themes to its language and violence—and it happens in more public and K-12 libraries [and classrooms] than you think. (n.p.)

Sometimes these decisions are made to avoid any possibility of backlash from parents, and other times they happen because teachers or school librarians employ their own sense of morality on the development of collections and curricula. Within the last few years in particular, the rise of trigger warnings has influenced the ways in which materials are chosen for the classroom. In order to avoid confronting topics that might invoke strongly emotional reactions among students, teachers simply avoid using texts that cover those topics in any way.

In their *Atlantic* article, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (2015) question the use of trigger warnings, suggesting that they serve only to coddle instead of challenge the next generation of thinkers and teachers: "The ultimate aim, it seems, is to turn campuses into 'safe spaces' where young adults are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable" (n.p.). Do trigger warnings help when so many who are gender nonconforming and queer have been and often continue to be subjected to real-life abuse and harassment? Does avoidance of challenging topics cause teachers to rethink necessary and controversial texts out of fear of retaliation from students, administration, and other teachers?

## Teaching Queer Texts and Non-normative Identities

In the fall of 1993, Elizabeth Noll (1994) found herself exceptionally troubled while listening to teachers in her community speak of fear of backlash from the community and its impact on their selection of texts

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**The very concept of self-censorship is a tricky thing. There is a fine line between what some consider common sense, what others find to be simple consideration for those who are a little more sensitive, and what still others consider a form of censorship that keeps educational opportunities hidden from students.**

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for classroom use. In Noll's survey of teachers from seven states, she found that "nearly all of the teachers surveyed indicated that they have been questioned, challenged, or censored for their use of literature" (p. 60). She also notes that "those who have been personally involved or have had close ties to incidents were more likely to express uneasiness and even fear about the threat of censorship" (p. 60). A more recent example of this fear leading to self-censorship is noted in Whelan's (2009) *School Library Journal* article. Joel Shoemaker, a secondary school teacher, writes, "I literally think about it every day. . . . I've had friends who've lost their jobs, had their marriages destroyed, developed mental and physical illnesses due to the stress of having their collection-development decisions challenged" (n.p.).

Teachers become "caught in the middle between a desire to teach according to their beliefs on the one hand and pressures to conform and use 'safe' literature on the other" (Noll, 1994, p. 63). As teachers, however, it is also our responsibility to present new and challenging ideas to students to help normalize certain concepts, such as gender and sexual difference, so that they are no longer something to fear. I am in no way suggesting that this change will be easy or quick, but it is necessary. Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) discuss the necessity of teaching critical thinking and avoiding self-censorship by purposefully teaching texts that just might invite backlash but may also simultaneously result in the challenging of social expectations of what is "normal." "Questioning sometimes leads to discomfort, and even to anger, on the way to understanding" (n.p.).

In catering to trigger warnings or caving to self-censorship, the learning that comes from moments of discomfort, anger, and frustration can never take place. By encouraging teens to read more widely and focus energy on reading uncomfortable texts, teachers can help young students overcome prior biases. As noted earlier, informal reading lists or classroom libraries can be good spaces through which to increase visibility of gender nonconforming fiction and teen memoir. Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) concur, writing, "Rather than trying to protect students from words and ideas that they will inevitably encounter, [teachers] should do all they can to equip students to thrive in a world full of words and ideas that they cannot control" (n.p.).

Whether you decide to take a leap and teach a YA novel with themes of gender nonconformity in your classroom or more subtly build a classroom library that students can access on their own, it is incredibly important to consciously include content on gender and sexual difference so that fear of the Other becomes a thing of the past. It is our responsibility to let students know that such literature exists, too. Young people have a right to read, and we have a responsibility to give them a wide range of resources to choose from. After all, the right to read means nothing if those of us who can promote challenging and complex literature choose instead to hide it or avoid it out of fear.

### Endnotes

1. According to Hill (2010), "What distinguishes self-censorship from actual censorship is a librarian's fear that something might happen. Second-guessing is the motivating force behind surreptitious acts like removing or misplacing a book or even restricting its access" (p. 9).
2. [A] girl gets this pathologizing label [of gender identity disorder of childhood] only in the rare case in which she asserts that she actually is anatomically male, whereas a boy can be treated for gender identity disorder of childhood if he merely asserts "that it would be better not to have a penis," or, alternatively, if he displays a "preoccupation with female stereotypical activities as manifested by a preference for either cross-dressing or simulating female attire, or by a compelling desire to participate in the games and pastimes of girls" (Sedgwick, 2004, p. 141).

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## Follow, Like, Dialogue, and Connect with Young Adult Authors via Social Media

*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/>.*

**S**ocial media can powerfully connect educators, authors, librarians, and students. As NCTE/ALAN members, we might use social media to make professional connections with educator “rock stars” (as described by Coke, 2013) or, as discussed in this column, with young adult (YA) authors. Historically, students, educators, and librarians have had limited opportunities to meet or interact with many of the diverse authors they’ve read, been inspired by, or made a personal heartfelt connection with in response to a book. Happily, these limitations are diminishing as a result of rising access to digital and mobile tools. We can connect with authors via platforms like Skype, as described by Ginsberg (2013), for example. With more authors publicizing their work on a variety of social media platforms, students and educators have opportunities to become acquainted with writers in ongoing and personalized ways.

Students of all ages may not realize that many authors maintain a digital presence on social media. Although students may already be connecting socially in digital spaces, this networked approach (Siemens, 2005) can be modeled, discussed, supported, taught, and practiced to enhance learning. For instance, in my instruction of preservice teachers and graduate students in literacy courses, I seek ways to find author

and educator role models for my students to follow on social media. I often start by selecting a widely known author or the author of a shared novel we are reading as a class; I do this to broaden my student’s professional and literary worlds, to help them learn beyond the texts they read, and to encourage them to see authors as real people. My hope is that this process will motivate them to learn more about authors and to make these connections on their own through digital media, such as their mobile devices.

This approach also moves beyond formalist “author-free” schools of thought of literary analysis. We aren’t merely looking inside the text for structures, irrespective of an author. Learning about the author can personalize and enhance the reading experience. Connecting students to authors in multifaceted ways via social networks aligns with approaches to learning that are grounded in a mentor text framework (e.g., Gallagher, 2011) in which authors model and mentor through text and can continue to do so through Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Mentor texts serve as exemplar texts with a specific teaching focus for analysis and further study. If I am teaching about incorporating voice and style in writing, for instance, I might draw on excerpts from the work of specific authors who teach and exemplify this writing trait well. I can use these authors’ works as mentor texts or models to guide my students’ ability to both analyze texts and write with their own voices. The author continues to be a role model of writing through the reading of social media posts.

### Three Ways to Connect to Authors and Texts via Social Media

One way to foster networked communication with young adult authors is to connect through Twitter, author blogs, Instagram, and other easily accessible digital platforms. In this column, I suggest a three-fold (three-layered) approach to entering these digital spaces with young adult authors. These do not have to be in this sequence, but gaining experience with social media (Layer 1) helps to facilitate student learning more effectively.

First, educators and librarians might begin regularly connecting with authors and other professionals via their own social media channels. Not all authors maintain their own social media, so determining which are actually checked by the authors themselves is important. This step might also include following other librarians and educators who blog *about* YA books, trends, and authors.

Second, students can follow young adult authors on an author’s blog, on YouTube (or other video channel), via podcasts, and through other social media. Educators and librarians can curate content of social media from authors who blog, Tweet, etc. Students might begin this layer by reading and writ-

ing *about* authors; they can also link to the author’s social media in their written reader response. Useful opportunities for engaging students in digital reader response were explored by Groenke & Laughter (2015) in the recent Layered Literacies column, “Tech Tools for Reader Response, Communal Engagement, and Effective Writing.”

Third, students can comment, retweet, and otherwise engage with authors in digital spaces. They can also pose questions, make reader-response comments, and even chat with the authors. Starting with authors who post content regularly and who interact with followers seems to be a good first step. Examples provided in this column are representative, but educators and students can do the groundwork to locate their own favorite authors online.

#### Layer 1: Getting the Lay of the Land of YA Authors and Texts via Twitter

At this initial layer of connecting, educators can explore and navigate online spaces where authors connect with readership and fans. This can also include broadly exploring conversations *about* young adult authors in addition to what authors are directly sharing via social media and/or blogging. Another way to connect is through social media outlets. Twitter is another great place to find authors. Figure 1 shares a few starter hashtags and groups for connecting and

expanding a professional learning network (PLN) via Twitter. A Twitter glossary of terms is available online at <https://support.twitter.com/articles/166337>.

Following these suggested Twitter handles (with the @ sign) or hashtags (with the # sign) allows for an expanded knowledge of young adult authors and a wider professional learning network (PLN). It also allows for the development of skills specific to Twitter, a prerequisite for helping students to connect with authors via this platform. The easiest way to locate social media is through authors’ and/or publishers’ Web page(s). (This conversation about which authors and hashtags to follow can continue on *The ALAN Review* Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/The-ALAN-Review-1381540955403962>) and on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/ALANReview>). Post a Tweet or tag and follow *The ALAN Review* to

Twitter Hashtag or Twitter Handle	Content/Reason to Follow
• #yalit	Explore updates on young adult literature.
• #yalitchat	Explore updates on young adult literature.
• #nctechat	Make general connections with other NCTE members on regularly scheduled Twitter chats. Join this chat on the third Sunday of each month at 8:00 p.m. EST.
• #titletalk	See what people are reading on this monthly Twitter chat run by Donalyn Miller on current YA Lit book titles. Also see #bookaday.  #titletalk is on Twitter the last Sunday of each month from 8:00–9:00 p.m. EST. The archive can be found at <a href="https://titletalk-chat.wordpress.com/">https://titletalk-chat.wordpress.com/</a> .
• Various publishers of young adult literature, e.g., @HarperTeen, @PenguinTeen, @random-housekids, @SimonTEEN, among others	Gain access to publishers’ leads on titles set for upcoming release and other author information.

Figure 1. Twitter hashtags that give educators a “lay of the land” in YA lit

connect with the journal. The Twitter handle is: @ALANReview.)

There are three primary reasons that making social media connections with other librarians, educators, authors, and publishers can be useful. First, educators can begin to make professional connections while broadening their overall knowledge base about the field of young adult literature, including new and forthcoming publications, trends in the field, and specific lesson and teaching ideas. Second, information gleaned can be shared with students. Relevant facts, links, and information about an author’s world and public persona can be shared in a discussion, an introduction to a book, a podcast, or an author or genre study. Additionally, information can be shared through common digital spaces such as a class or library blog. Third, exploring authors and publishers on social media allows educators to find engaging author-focused content for students to read. If instructors only want students to read the literary/writing-focused posts by an author, for instance, they might collect and curate the content using the tool Storify (<https://storify.com/>). Storify is a Web and mobile app for importing social media-based content. An educator could select specific Tweets from an author, for example, and put them in a specific order to be read by students. Content can be imported from Twitter, Facebook, YouTube (videos), Instagram (images), SoundCloud (audio-based content), and other platforms.

**Layer 2: Guiding Students to Explore Authors on Social Media**

Once an educator or librarian is grounded in social media as a tool to professionally connect with others and has gained experience reading, learning, and exchanging ideas about authors and text(s) via social media, the next step might be to facilitate the students’ exploration of content on authors’ own social media channels. To best support learners, educators and librarians might begin with curating social media pages of authors who post regularly on social media

and/or blogging spaces with the goal of helping students locate their own authors of interest.

For instance, an author who regularly posts about her writerly life to social media is Jacqueline Woodson. Educators and librarians might collect her Tweets into a curated Storify document and share the link with students. They might read aloud author Tweets and think aloud with students about what her posts suggest about the writing process and how that might connect with her craft, literary themes, or genre choices, for example. To curate content, Twitter Lists (<https://support.twitter.com/articles/76460>) or social bookmarking tools—e.g., diigo ([www.diigo.com](http://www.diigo.com)), symboloo (<https://www.symboloo.com>), or delicious (<http://delicious.com>)—allow students to begin in a “read-only” mode to start. A shared digital table in a Google Doc would also allow for the curation and organization of author leads. This table might provide author information, links to social media, and links to author-created blogs. This could be structured as shown in Figure 2.

Encouraging students to follow selected authors on social media and other digital connections can foster creativity and critical thinking. Students can retweet interesting posts to their own followers or share what they find with the class on a wiki, blog, or other digital space. A bulletin board space (physical or virtual) might allow for a visual display of these author posts. In addition, critical thinking and discussion would foster conversation about the author’s digital presence. *How does the author present her- or himself in social media? How does the author choose to be digitally connected?* These “meta-discussions” of digital representation are a component of fostering digital literacy.

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**Encouraging students to follow selected authors on social media and other digital connections can foster creativity and critical thinking.**

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Author	Web Page Link(s)	Blog Link	Facebook Page Link	Twitter Page Link	Instagram Page Link

**Figure 2.** Example of digital table with curated author social media information for students

As a caveat, it is important to remember that personal social media accounts are most often restricted to users who are 13 years of age or older. Individual schools and districts also have their own social media policies. Checking with parents/guardians of minors and/or school administrators is always good practice when incorporating social media use.

### Layer 3: Connecting Students Directly with Authors via Social Media

Students can begin to directly connect with an author

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**These are not only exciting and accessible ways to connect with each other but serve as engaging digital portals of entry through which students can connect directly with authors about their writing and personal worlds.**

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on digital spaces by “liking” posts or by leaving comments on the author’s blog or other social media space(s). Students may simply wish to start by commenting on the author’s literary repertoire as a whole or on a specific book. It is helpful to provide students with examples of what these posts or comments might look like. There are several types of questions and comments that can be posted by students to communicate with authors directly. Some

examples are listed below:

1. **Author as writer/mentor.** Students might compose comments or questions responding to the *author as a writer and mentor*. This could include the posing of genuine questions about the author’s writing process or literary choices; this is especially useful if the student is seeking to emulate the author’s writing style, dialogue, craft choices, and/or genre focus. It involves stepping out of the text (Langer, 1995) to engage in literary meaning making. Providing and discussing with students the tools and language of literary analysis support these kinds of conversations with authors.
2. **Author-as-person.** Students can make comments regarding the author as a person. For instance, authors might share celebrations or news links related to current issues or professional or personal milestones. Students can post questions, comments, or provide an encouraging word to the author related

to the author’s posts.

3. **Stepping inside the text: Story and text-focused questions.** Drawing on the work of Judith Langer (1995) and her envisionment model of literary meaning making, we know that when students are deeply immersed in a story world or caught up in the details of an informational or argumentative text, questions arise; those questions can be posed to authors.

These are just a few ways to help students organize and construct posts and comments to authors. Students’ own thoughts will also emerge organically, of course. By way of example, consider how such student–author interactions might look in the case of YA author Jacqueline Woodson, who regularly posts both personal and writing-related Tweets, many of which lift up other authors and those who are making changes in the world ([@JackieWoodson](https://twitter.com/JackieWoodson)). To examine these Tweets, educators and librarians might ask students the following questions: *What do Jacqueline Woodson’s Tweets tell us about her as a person and as an author? How can we synthesize what we are learning about the author on social media with her writing style, choice of subject matter, and characters?* Students might also follow Woodson on other social media communication platforms, including her website (<http://www.jacqueline-woodson.com/>) and Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/Jacqueline.Woodson>).

Given these options, educators and librarians have multiple avenues for guiding students to make connections to authors on a regular basis. It is important to impress upon students, however, that they should be selective in how often they post or comment on the pages or posts of busy authors. They might also read through or skim previous social media content to see if a similar question has already been asked. It helps to model this process; educators and librarians can not only share the many options, they can also Tweet and/or post comments in visible ways while thinking aloud about their process.

### Net Etiquette (“Netiquette”) for Students: Commenting and Connecting

An essential component of connecting online includes sharing with students about proper “netiquette” (net etiquette) and expectations for how to connect with authors on social media. Formality and tone vary



according to the type of social media. For instance, when commenting, students should be taught to use varying levels of language depending on the context and platform of the post. The expectation of the level of formality can be discussed and determined by the instructor and student. For instance, on Twitter, less formal and short responses are necessary because Tweets must be 140 characters or less. However, in longer digital posts, such as blog comments, students can carefully craft longer comments. In all cases, they may want to proofread for writing tone, grammar, and spelling.

## Conclusion

Authors, publishers, literacy organizations, librarians, and educators are connecting on social media using platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. These are not only exciting and accessible ways to connect with each other but serve as engaging digital portals of entry through which students can connect directly with authors about their writerly and personal worlds. This process can inform students' thinking about books and authors and perhaps leave them wanting to know more about the person behind the book. It is especially easy to connect to social media via a mobile device. Mobile learning is increasingly ubiquitous in and out of classroom spaces.

Fostering and encouraging participatory connections to authors can be done by curating content, reading aloud from authors' posts and blogs, and otherwise using selected digital media content as curriculum within the classroom. Out of the classroom, students can continue to connect with authors through social media. It can also be personally satisfying to learn more about a favorite author. For instance, it was exhilarating to follow along with Jacqueline Woodson as she Tweeted and posted on Facebook after winning the National Book Award for *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014). Authors can challenge our ideas; they can push us out of our comfort zones with a body of work or just a post. The result is that we look

deeper and further into critical issues, as Woodson encouraged us to do by confronting the issue of racial justice.

On a broader level, beyond books and authors, social media connections provide ways for students and educators to connect to trends such as #weneed-diversebooks. These are important conversations, and they can begin from the Twittersphere (where we post Tweets) and the blogosphere (the online blogging world) where both our students and we can learn more about the nuanced and complex facets of books and authorship.

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# The Irresponsibility of Oversimplification:

A Collaborative Conversation

**From the Editors:** In this article, we are honored to feature a written conversation between Kwame Alexander and Jason Reynolds, award-winning authors who have given readers some of the most lyrical writing in middle-grade and YA fiction. We appreciate the generous responses of these authors (and their publishers) and their willingness to engage with challenging, important questions of difference, diversity, and representation.

*As authors, how do you use language to describe the varied characters and settings you create? How do you craft people and places that are potentially unfamiliar to readers without falling into stereotypical representations?*

**Kwame:** This is definitely a Jason question, as he's a lot more conscious of his audience and his responsibility to them in his writing. In my opinion, that is. I just try to be authentic. I write about the kinds of things I like and have some passion for. And mostly that's characters. I'm not overly concerned with, or rather interested in, setting because I want the reader to be able to step in those shoes as a participant, not an observer, wherever they may live. Bottom line for me is we are all more alike than we are different, so I'm much more interested in putting soul on paper, on showing the beauty and tragedy and hopefulness of our lives. That's something we can all connect with. I like to think I am an authentic person who genuinely cares about people and wants the world to be better. So that's

the space I write from. It may sound all hokey and whatnot, but that's it. Like I said, this is a Jason question.

**Jason:** Oh please, Kwame. You nailed it. I feel the same way. I also try to really provide sensory details. How does an environment sound? How does it smell? How does it feel? How does it look? The key is to build a world, even if that world already exists, and to approach characters as if they themselves are in fact settings and as if each setting is a character. I also think stereotypes are problematic—not because they are untrue, which is not always the case, but because they are one-dimensional, oversimplified, and often devoid of complexity and nuance. So if I describe a “poor” neighborhood, I can't describe the stereotypical, though often real, pain and struggle without also exploring the joy, love, and connectivity that are just as real. Just as we connect with hopefulness, we also connect through the depiction of balance.

*Is there ever a place for stereotyping in storytelling?*

**Jason:** Nope, I don't think so. As a writer, to oversimplify anything—especially people and places—is to be lazy and/or cowardly and/or irresponsible. Actually, as a HUMAN, to oversimplify anything—especially people and places—is to be lazy and/or cowardly and/or irresponsible. What you think, Kwame?

**Kwame:** Hey look, I'm trying to help young people imagine a better world. Imagine what's possible for them, for us. To do that, I work to be fresh, new, exciting, and sometimes wonderfully complex, and so to spend energy on stereotyping characters, situations, cultures, takes away from that focus. Plus, yeah, it's lazy. Sure, one might say, well sometimes in order to change something, you have to expose it, and I get that. Thing is, stereotypes are what they are because we all already know about them. They're always exposed, aren't they? This is a prime reason why I think writers of children's literature who use the n-word ought to rethink that. We get the connotation, its offensiveness, its volatility. I'm not sure there's anything new you can bring to us that's going to bring your storytelling, and our connection to it, to life. In some cases, it might even be irresponsible writing. I say show us a new groove, write a poem that dances wild and free. Write a story that travels, steps outside of your cramped apartment, leaves all that tired baggage at home, and catches a train somewhere.

Finally, stereotyping, especially in picturebooks, doesn't allow for nuance, and that leads to oversimplification, which is basically what happened with those two problematic children's books featuring smiling, enslaved Africans, but that's a whole other thing, so yeah, Jason, don't get me started.

*How might language, woven through story, invite exploration of difference centered on (dis)ability, sexual identity or orientation, gender, race, nationality, culture, age, and/or physical appearance?*

**Jason:** One of the most powerful things about story is that in story, language has a spacious framework to stretch out in, to really get beneath the surface in ways not many other mediums have the scope to do. Language can obviously be used to describe and lay out differences explicitly, but it can also be used to draw attention to differences implicitly simply by how the language exists on the page as far as word choice, syntax, vernacular, punctuation, and format go. We've seen it several times, such as in Emma Donoghue's (2010) *Room*, where the language is used to create the voice of a traumatized toddler. Or in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in*

*the Night-time* (Haddon, 2003) where language and format are just as integral to the plot as the climax, visually (with language) providing us a window into the mind of an (assumed) autistic child.

**Kwame:** I think the more interesting question is how language might invite exploration of similarity, of unity, of humanity. The differences have been explored and magnified and are ultimately responsible for why we don't see a lot of diverse books. If I view you as being different, as being other, then I am less open to seeing you in my circle of inclusion. It may not even be intentional, but it has the same effect. You become invisible.

*How do you get to know your characters, especially those whose lives and experiences are different from your own?*

**Kwame:** Think. Study. Research. Dream. Imagine. Live.

Also, I practice this thing called Butt. In. Chair. And so I sit in a chair for five hours for five days a week and write (though lately that chair has been on a plane or in a hotel), and eventually the characters move into my head. They live with me. They sleep with me. They tell me things. We talk. We laugh together. I spend a lot of time with them. I spent *five years* with Josh and JB. You spend that amount of time with anybody, trust me, you know them.

But, you gotta be authentic. I was listening to Doreen Rappaport recently, and she was talking about her career as a White writer writing children's picturebooks about Black historical figures. She was sharing her life experiences, and it was clear that she lives an authentic life and is able to put her feet into the shoes of these figures who have had very different experiences from hers because of her sensibilities and her sensitivities and her awareness and, of course, her study. But, I think most of all, it's her humanity.

**Jason:** I agree, but there are all sorts of ways to reach that authenticity. I try to vet my characters as much as I can. I also like to draw from people I know well—outside of the vetting process—making sure that I don't assume I know everything based on our relationship, but using moments of intimacy

and honesty to flesh out some of the intricacies of a person outside of myself based on the experiences I've had being on the receiving end. For instance, if one has never been a teacher, one must question what can be deduced about being a teacher, having been a student. Of course, this deduction has to be coupled with research and vetting, but it's the deduction that can take the character from being a bundle of checked boxes to an interesting, whole character on the page. The other thing I do is remember that no matter who my characters are, they are still human. They still need to have basic human components. Fear and ambition. Passion and vulnerability. Joy and pain. If we write characters as human first, we'll be 75% on the mark, every time. That being said, I've also made mistakes. They're inevitable. And when they happen, I learn from them and try not to make them again.

***What accepted ways of thinking and understanding would you most like to have challenged through your writings?***

**Jason:** That boys and men are unemotional and lack the ability to be introspective and vulnerable. Such a big deal for me. Also, I'd like to continue to add to the tradition of showing Black people as well-rounded and intricate. We're an elaborate, complicated people with *every* kind of story.

**Kwame:** I'm writing a middle-grade trilogy set in the mid-1800s about a swimmer because I want kids (and adults) to know that Black history begins before slavery. There were families and children and bullies and friendships and sports and communities blossoming way before Africans were kidnapped and taken to America.

Also, I want my readers to know that poetry rocks! That boys love poetry. That girls love poetry. That teachers and librarians love it. That we all love it, even though we may have forgotten that we do. And that ultimately it can be the bridge to get our children to become engaged writers and readers.

***For whom do you write?***

**Kwame:** I write for me. For you. For kids. For my daughter. For librarians. For my parents. For my

twelve-year-old self. For my adult self. Heck, there's a scene in the new book, *Booked* (2016), that I couldn't wait to show Jackie Woodson because I knew she would enjoy it, appreciate it, connect with it. Whether I'm writing a picturebook or a middle-grade novel or a love poem, I am ultimately writing to understand myself a little better, to understand the world and my place in it a little better. When I write, I try to impress myself, all of my selves, and I figure if I love it, then there's a good chance the reader will, too. I write for the human soul entire.

**Jason:** I agree. First and foremost, I write for me. But I only write for me in the sense that I sincerely want these stories to exist . . . for us. And by us, I mean all of us. For the mom who just wants her son to see himself. For the son who didn't know he really *didn't* hate reading. For the suburban lady who has been afraid of certain people in certain environments. For the young girl who wants to be proud of where she's from. For the misunderstood and the proud and the troubled and the scared and the gritty and the curious. And yes, even for you, Kwame. All of us.

**Kwame Alexander** is a poet, educator, and New York Times bestselling author of 21 books, including *The Crossover*, which received the 2015 John Newbery Medal, the Coretta Scott King Author Award Honor, the NCTE Charlotte Huck Honor, the Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award, and the Paterson Poetry Prize. His other works include *Surf's Up*, a picturebook, and *Booked*, a middle-grade novel-in-verse.

**Jason Reynolds** is the critically acclaimed author of *When I Was the Greatest*, recipient of the Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award, the Coretta Scott King Honor book, *The Boy in the Black Suit*, and *All American Boys*, co-written with Brendan Kiely. His debut middle-grade novel, *As Brave as You*, hits shelves in May.

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