



From the Editors

The Psychology of YA Literature: Traversing the Intersection of Mind, Body, and Soul

Mental illness as well as other effects of violence, trauma, and psychological issues permeate the lives of the young people with whom we work and the families and friends who exist around them. Young adult authors have taken up these topics in their writings, providing space and opportunity for readers to find solace and support and to develop understandings that complicate existing assumptions and beliefs.

In this issue, contributors invite us to consider how YA authors explore, for example, what it means to feel lost, to be in that “moment when I know that I should scream. But screaming would be hard. And blackness would be easy. Black picks me” (E. K. Johnson, *Exit, pursued by a bear*, 2016, p. 47). Or to feel worn out, to have “no emotions left: I was a candle that’d burned all the way down” (Rahul Kanakia, *Enter Title Here*, 2016, p. 181). Or to want something you cannot have due to forces out of your control: “I want to grab your hand, allow you to pull me through, to take us wherever you want to go, fill my calendar with your smile and laugh the way we used to” (Eric Gansworth, *If I Ever Get Out of Here*, 2013, p. 12).

In the context of our work as educators, contributors describe efforts at using YA literature in the classroom in ways that might help students build richer, more accurate understandings of mental illness, trauma, and the impact of violence as well as learn to challenge, as noted by David Levithan, how “some people think mental illness is a matter of mood, a matter of personality. They think depression is simply a form of being sad, that OCD is a form of being uptight. They think the soul is sick, not the body. It is, they believe, something that you have some choice over. I

know how wrong this is” (*Every Day*, 2012, p. 119).

We open this issue with Neal Shusterman’s 2017 ALAN Award Acceptance Speech, “We Are the Sum of Our Experiences.” Neal shares three stories of himself as a writer and person, highlighting within and across the tales the influence and importance of the choices we make, especially when we are not assured a particular outcome.

YA authors Nina LaCour, Meg Medina, and Chelsea Sedoti then talk together in “Navigating Trauma through the Art of Fiction: A Collaborative Conversation.” They discuss how characters in their novels face trauma, how they as authors might respond to concerns that such topics are too sad or difficult for readers, and how teachers might invite students to engage with their titles in ways that offer connection and hope.

Amber Moore’s “We Believe Her: Sexual Assault and Friend/Ally/ship in *Exit, pursued by a bear*” argues that E. K. Johnson’s (2016) novel is a unique YA sexual assault narrative given how its rape survivor protagonist is surrounded by allies in her private and public worlds. The protagonist’s friend/ally/ship with her queer best friend becomes a site of resistance, critical dialogue, and support in connection with sexual assault and queer youth identity emergence.

In “Selling the Performance: Unpacking the Relationship between Media Representations, Eating Disorders, and *Wintergirls*,” Pamela K. Coke draws from interviews with university students in a young adult literature course to examine how two participants’ experiences with media representations of body image, including Laurie Halse Anderson’s (2009) novel, played a role in how they performed gender in

adolescence. Coke argues that educators, in assigning texts to readers, have an obligation to pay attention to media representation and the performance it encourages and perhaps requires of some readers.

Kia Jane Richmond's "An Examination of Mental Illness, Stigma, and Language in *My Friend Dahmer*" analyzes author Derf Backderf's (2012) language within the novel relative to its authenticity as defined by the American Psychiatric Association's descriptions of alcohol use disorder and necrophilia. Using critical discourse analysis, she considers how Backderf's language, in his characterization of Jeffrey Dahmer's behaviors and emotions as a high school student in rural Ohio, reflects stereotypes commonly held about individuals with mental disorders and contributes to ongoing stigmatization of mental illness.

Alyssa Chrisman, in her piece "Living with It: Disabling Depictions of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder in Young Adult Literature," draws attention to the portrayal of OCD, an anxiety disorder that is particularly debilitating and misunderstood. She critically analyzes three YA novels to describe how they fall short and/or succeed in creating space for alternate and inclusive representations of OCD. She also provides ideas for using these texts in classrooms.

Brandon L. Sams and Mike P. Cook present an instructional unit on death and dying in their article "Living Well, Dying Well: Engaging Students in Mindful Inquiry through *The Last Summer of the Death Warriors*." They approach the unit from a comparative perspective, one of mindfulness and contemplation influenced by Eastern philosophical and spiritual traditions. Incorporating meditation and reflective writing, the instructional approach serves as a platform for having meaningful conversations about dying well and what the processes of dying (and living with those who are dying) make possible and visible in our lives.

In their article, "Examining Agency in Contemporary Young Adult Illness Narratives," Kathryn Caprino and Tara Anderson Gold analyze three focal YA texts that feature stories about adolescents with physical and mental illnesses. They also provide strategies and lesson ideas for teachers that promote the incorporation of YA illness narratives into the curriculum, encourage considerations of agency in the context of these narratives, and promote critical literacy.

In her first Book in Review: A Teaching Guide column, titled "Leaning into Young Adult Literature as Our Curriculum: The Intimacy of Choice," Sarah J.

Donovan explores the importance of student choice when reading about trauma in the classroom. She invites readers to consider reading workshop titles that are not regularly included in classrooms, including two books for older young adult readers, *In Sight of Stars* (Polisner, 2018) and *Blood Water Paint* (McCullough, 2018); a book that can be stretched into junior high, *The Night Diary* (Hiranandani, 2018); and two anthologies, *#NotYourPrincess* (Charley-boy & Leatherdale, 2017) and *Hope Nation* (Brock, 2018). Each title explores trauma, but also represents the strength and resilience of teens confronting the sources of the traumas they face.

In the Right to Read column, "Still Looking for Alaska: Exploring Female Identity Development after Trauma," the authors examine John Green's (2005) oft-censored novel in an attempt to better understand Alaska's character. Marissa Fackler, graduate student and emerging English teacher, and Kristine Gritter, editor of the column, invited counselor educators Christie Eppler of Seattle University's Couple and Family Therapy and June Hyun of Seattle Pacific University's Counselor Education programs to participate in a conversation centered on why Alaska behaves as she does when seen through the lens of trauma and mental health.

In her inaugural Layered Literacies column, Leigh A. Hall invited Michelle M. Falter to share the ways in which English teachers might discuss openly with students the potential problems of social media use. In "Peeling Back the Adolescent Armor: Putting a Positive Spin on Using Social Media for Secret Sharing," the authors use *Life by Committee* (Haydu, 2014) as a focal text to describe how educators can invite such conversations with students. They also explore how teachers might layer literacies by combining young adult literature, social media apps, and multimodal stories in the process.

"Complicating Conceptions of Mental Health: A Collaborative Conversation" features the words of five YA authors who explore mental health with care in their writing. Brandy Colbert, Emery Lord, Neal Shusterman, Sonya Sones, and John Corey Whaley engage in a written discussion about conceptualizations and depictions of mental health within the field of YAL, including how they navigate this content as authors, how readers respond to their work, and what might be missing from narratives that depict mental illness.

Across all of the articles in this issue, we are reminded that this work can offer hope. Yes, it is a

“hard cycle to conquer. The body is working against you. And because of this, you feel even more despair. Which only amplifies the imbalance. It takes uncommon strength to live with these things. But I have seen that strength over and over again” (David Levithan, *Every Day*, pp. 119–120).

References

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Call for Manuscripts

Submitting a Manuscript:

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

Summer 2019: What's Now? What's New? What's Next?

Submissions due on or before November 1, 2018

The field of young adult literature has exploded over the past few decades. As a result, we have enjoyed increasing numbers of memorable stories written by authors willing to trust their readers with complexity and challenge. We have learned from colleagues who have implemented innovative approaches to teaching and thinking about this literature and its implications for the young people who read it. And we have begun to think carefully and critically about whose voices are present and not present and how literature both reflects and has the potential to shape the sociocultural realities in which we live and work.

In our final issue as editors of *The ALAN Review*, we aim to create space for reflection, contemplation, and anticipation around young adult literature. We invite you to consider where we are, what we've accomplished, and what we all might tackle in our collective pursuit of scholarship and teaching. As we engage in this work, we find inspiration in the words of Nicola Yoon: “I was trying so hard to find the single pivotal moment that set my life on its path. The moment that answered the question, ‘How did I get here?’ But it's never just one moment. It's a series of them. And your life can branch out from each one in a thousand different ways” (*Everything, Everything*, p. 305). And we are reminded that we can (and must) do better in this work, knowing that “Sometimes you can do everything right and things will still go wrong. The key is to never stop doing right” (Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give*, p. 155). Given our shared commitment to books, young people, and a better tomorrow, we are hopeful that our forward momentum will impel us to move the field ahead in ways that foster equity and social justice for all. As Renee Ahdieh intones, “When I was a boy, my mother would tell me that one of the best things in life is the knowledge that our story isn't over yet. Our story may have come to a close, but your story is still yet to be told. Make it a story worthy of you” (*The Wrath and the Dawn*, p. 387).

As always, we also welcome submissions focused on any aspect of young adult literature not directly connected to these themes. Please see the ALAN website (<http://www.alan-ya.org/page/alan-review-author-guidelines>) for submission guidelines.