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THE
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REVIEW

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Instructions for **Authors**

ABOUT *THE ALAN REVIEW*. *The ALAN Review (TAR;* ISSN 0882-2840 [Print], ISSN 1547-741X [Online]) publishes articles that explore, examine, critique, and advocate for literature for young adults and the teaching of that literature. Published pieces include, but are not limited to, research studies, papers presented at professional meetings, surveys of the literature, critiques of the literature, articles about authors, comparative studies across genres and/or cultures, articles on ways to teach the literature to adolescents, and interviews with YA authors.

AUDIENCE. Many of the individual members of ALAN are classroom teachers of English in middle, junior, and senior high schools. Other readers include university faculty members in English and/or Education programs, researchers in the field of young adult literature, librarians, YA authors, publishers, reading teachers, and teachers in related content areas. ALAN has members in all 50 United States and a number of foreign countries.

PREFERRED STYLE. Manuscripts should usually be no longer than twenty double-spaced, typed pages, not including references. A manuscript submitted for consideration should deal specifically with literature for young adults and/or the teaching of that literature. It should have a clearly defined topic and be scholarly in content, as well as practical and useful to people working with and/or studying young adults and their literature. Research studies and papers should be treated as articles rather than formal reports. Stereotyping on the basis of sex, race, age, etc., should be avoided, as should gender-specific terms such as "chairman."

MANUSCRIPT FORMAT. Manuscripts should be double-spaced throughout, including quotations and bibliographies. The names of submitting authors should not appear anywhere in the manuscript. Short quotations, as permitted under "fair use" in the copyright law, must be carefully documented within the manuscript and in the bibliography. Longer quotations and complete poems or short stories must be accompanied by written permission from the copyright owner. YA author interviews should be accompanied by written permission for publication in *TAR* from the interviewed author(s). Interviewers should indicate to the author(s) that publication is subject to review of an editorial board. Original short tables and figures should be double-spaced and placed on separate sheets at the end of the manuscript. Notations should appear in the text indicating proper placement of tables and figures.

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

SUBMITTING THE MANUSCRIPT. Authors should submit manuscripts electronically to thealanreview@gmail.com. In the subject line, please write: ALAN Manuscript Submission. All manuscripts should be written using a recent version of Microsoft Word and use APA bibliographical format. Complete submissions include, as separate attachments, the following documents: 1) An abstract of no more than 150 words; 2) A manuscript without references to the author(s) and with name(s) removed in the Properties section under the File menu to ensure the piece is blinded; 3) A title page with names, affiliations, mailing addresses, and 100- to 150-word professional biographies for each submitting author, as well as a brief statement that the article is original, has not been published previously in other journals and/or books, and is not a simultaneous submission.

REVIEW PROCESS. Each manuscript will receive a blind review by the editors and at least three members of the Editorial Review Board, unless the length, style, or content makes it inappropriate for publication. Usually, authors should expect to hear the results within eight weeks. Manuscripts are judged for the contribution made to the field of young adult literature and mission of *The ALAN Review*, scholarly rigor, and clarity of writing. Selection also depends on the manuscript's contribution to the overall balance of the journal.

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

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

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

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

Wendy **Glenn,** Ricki **Ginsberg,** and Danielle **King-Watkins**

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. Johnston, *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

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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* (Charleyboy & 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).

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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.

We Are the Sum of Our Experiences:

2017 ALAN Award Acceptance Speech

I am overwhelmed and deeply grateful to be receiving the ALAN Award, and I can't thank all of you enough for this amazing honor. To receive an award for one's contribution to literature—one's entire body of work—is the most meaningful kind of award. It's validation not just of something you've written, but of your entire professional life. For writers, it's sometimes hard to see the forest for the trees. We slave over our computers, agonizing over details and word choices, and by the time a book is published, we're already agonizing over the next one. Thank you for seeing the forest—and for raising me up high enough to see it, too.

I have been lucky enough to have worked with some of the best in the publishing industry. Stephanie Lurie, David Gale, Rosemary Brosnan, Julie Strauss-Gabel, Ginee Seo, Andrea Pinkney. I really have had the privilege of working with the best editors—as well as an amazing agent, Andrea Brown, and fantastic publishers. Just yesterday, Justin Chanda, my publisher at Simon & Schuster, took me aside and talked to me with such excitement about my new book, *Thunderhead* (2018). It was like he was suddenly a teenager having a fanboy moment, and I remember thinking how incredibly blessed I am to be working with people who love what they do, who have held on to their youthful exuberance, and who are genuinely excited about children's publishing. It can only be
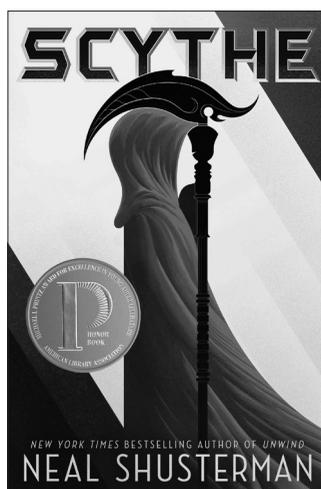
matched by the embrace my work has received from teachers and librarians. Thank you all for always making me feel that I am among friends. Among family.

I had prepared a speech for today, full of tried and true stories. Things that I know work for an audience. My "shticks." But I was increasingly frustrated by the speech—because on this unique and special occasion, I didn't want to just regurgitate things you might have heard before. I wanted to offer you something new. So I stayed up most of the night and dug deep down to come up with three stories I have never told publically, but that speak directly to my career as a writer and to me in general. It's a brief trilogy, with the added benefit that you don't have to wait a year between stories.

Chapter 1: The Day that Shopping Carts Took Over the World

I'm often asked what gave me the courage to take the leap into writing. What made me believe that I'd be able to succeed? There are so many influences along the way, but there actually is one moment that I can pinpoint. A turning point that came during my last year in college.

I began college as a biological science major. Premed. I was good in science and math, and my parents

always told me I'd be a doctor. So I just went with the assumption. Even though I wanted to be a writer, actor, composer, director, and basically everything *but* a doctor, I went with it . . . until my sophomore year, when I changed my major, deciding to double-major in psychology and theater. My parents were dubious but still supportive, albeit reluctantly so.

Also beginning in my sophomore year, I wrote a weekly humor column for the school paper. It was called "The Anonymous Column, by Neal Shusterman." The irony was funny for the first two installments. Then the name just stuck. It became very popular. By the time I was a senior, writing had emerged as my greatest passion. The Anonymous Column had gained me counterculture celebrity status at the University of California Irvine, because I was constantly satirizing the administration and the various problems that plagued the school—from parking to incompetent bureaucracy to the questionable physicians at the school's "health" center.

During my last year there, I made a student film. UC Irvine is not known for its film program. In fact, at the time, they only had one film-making class. My epic feature, all of 23 minutes, was called *V: Invaders from Vons,* Vons being a ubiquitous supermarket in California. The movie was a parody of Steven Spielberg films, from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg et al., 1977) to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Kasdan, 1981) to *E. T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Mathison, 1982), and was about shopping carts taking over the world. (Imagine our inciting incident. Point of view from a shopping cart rolling by itself through the aisles, the theme from *Jaws* [Benchley & Gottlieb, 1975] playing in the background. The cart zeroes in on a woman reaching for yogurt in the dairy case. She doesn't stand a chance.)

Once the movie was completed, I decided to show it publicly on campus. I used my column as a blatant advertisement for the movie (and titled that week's column, BLATANT ADVERTISEMENT FOR THE SHOPPING CART MOVIE). The movie was going to be shown at one of the school's lecture halls—ironically in the Biological Science Building.

As it turns out, my father was in town on business, so I invited him to come see the movie. Now, just so you understand my father, think of a cross between Jerry Stiller in *Seinfeld* and Archie Bunker. He

was a character. Funny and cantankerous and whimsically contrary. He once told us that in elections, he made a point of always voting against whoever my mother voted for, just to cancel out her vote. His name was Milton, and when he lost his temper, we called it "The Full Milton."

When I first told my father I wanted to be a writer, he was underwhelmed. He was not much of a reader and was proud of it. He once told me that the only fiction he ever read willingly was in high school: The Studs Lonigan trilogy (Farrell, 1932–1935) about a Chicago gangster kid in the early 1900s (which, by the way, is where author Studs Terkel got his nickname). My father vowed never to read another fictional book, because what was there after Studs Lonigan?

> **When I first told my father I wanted to be a writer, he was underwhelmed. He was not much of a reader and was proud of it.**

Anyway, the big night arrives. I'm pacing by the lecture hall entrance with my father. Ten minutes to show time. Five minutes. No one shows up. Not a single person. And I'm crushed. And embarrassed. And my father puts a paternal arm on my shoulder and says, "Let this be just another one of life's little lessons." And "Maybe this is a sign that you should rethink things . . . ."

Then—and I swear this actually happened—a friend of mine comes running up to me out of breath and says, "What the hell are you doing over here? Everyone's waiting around back."

I go around the building to the back side of the lecture hall, and there are nearly a hundred people waiting to be let in. The lecture hall was packed by the time I started the film. People laughed when they were supposed to. People cheered at the end when, to the emotional strains of the climactic music from *E. T.,* the hero cart that saved the world is taken away by a space ship made out of a desk organizer glued to the top of a Frisbee.

The shopping cart movie was a hit!

This was my grand, shining moment. Nevermind graduation (where, by the way, the valedictorian quoted from one of my columns during her address);

this was my defining collegiate experience. *Invaders from Vons!* One dollar admission plus free popcorn.

And as my father watched the response of the crowd, he was all smiles. Then, when everyone had left, he said to me, "Neal, I think you might be able to make this whole writing thing work."

And to me, that made all the difference in the world.

My father passed away in 2013, and true to his nature, he never read any of my books. *But* . . . he always went out of his way to go into bookstores, so he could put my books face-out on the bestseller shelves, whether they belonged there or not. That's how I knew he was proud of me.

> **I discovered during those three days that I existed—an individual separate and apart from my foundering marriage—and that I would still be here after it was over. It was not the end of the world.**

Chapter 2: The Day the World Didn't End

A few years ago, a teacher who had been following my work for years commented that my writing changed right around the year 2000. It became more thoughtful. Deeper. It touched on more universal issues and provoked more thought. More often than not, it's others who notice things about yourself that you're too close to see. As it turns out, that was the year of my divorce.

My ex-wife and I met when we were 19. A dorm romance. And from that moment on, we were joined at the hip. We became Neal-and-Elaine. We looked at people we knew getting divorced, and for us it wasn't even in our vocabulary. That was something that happened to *other* people. It would never happen to us. We were above that. I was naïve enough to think that the kind of relationship troubles that plagued others were beneath us. I didn't know it at the time, but I was seeing the world, and my own life, in a simplistic, childish way.

Around the time that Erin, our youngest daughter, was born, my wife and I were drifting apart emotionally. By this point in our lives, everything was about the kids. We tried to do "date nights" with each other and found that we had nothing to talk about. No common interests beyond our children. After 18 years as an inseparable couple, we had fallen out of love. We were each other's first love and had become a couple before we could become individual adults. She was wise enough to see that this had to end. We couldn't continue for the rest of our lives in a loveless relationship. People talk about broken families and failed relationships. Frankly, I find those characterizations hurtful and offensive. Our relationship didn't fail; it was completed. Our family isn't broken; it decompressed in a much-needed way.

But at the time, my pride wouldn't allow me to see what needed to happen. "I can fix this," I insisted. And I proceeded to set up hoops for myself to jump through, thinking they would save the marriage. Nothing was working, but I refused to accept it.

Then something remarkable happened. Out of the blue, I was called by a high school friend I hadn't seen in maybe 15 years. It was one week short of my 20-year high school reunion, and my classmates had been looking for me. It wasn't like I was all that hard to find, but I was no longer a part of any of those circles. While I had grown up in Brooklyn, my father, who was an engineer, had been assigned to a project in Mexico City while I was in high school, so I had gone to the American School of Mexico City—a school that I had loved but hadn't been back to since graduation. The reunion would be held there, and my friend wanted to know if I could go. I started to make excuses: "I can't just drop everything." "One week notice? Can you imagine the cost of airfare?" And then she said something to me that hit a chord so deep, I still remember the sound of her voice saying it: "If you don't go, you're going to regret it for the rest of your life."

Ten minutes later, I bought a roundtrip ticket to Mexico City.

I went alone, but I was not alone. I was among friends. The reunion was a spectacular three-day party, and those 20 years seemed to melt away in minutes. I discovered during those three days that I existed—an individual separate and apart from my foundering marriage—and that I would still be here after it was over. It was not the end of the world. That was a feeling I tried to capture years later in my novel *Bruiser* (2010), which deals with, among other things, divorce, emotional pain, and the fear that your world

is over.

The day I returned home from the reunion, I told my wife that I would agree to a divorce. We would, as we always did, put the kids first, and our split would be amicable. At that moment, I grew past my childish notions of what a relationship should be and the idea of happily ever after. One can't be grateful for divorce, but what I can be grateful for is that it forced me to grow—not just as a human being, but as a father, and also as a writer. I saw my life and the world from a new perspective—an honest perspective and, therefore, a healthier perspective.

Chapter 3: The Day I Turned to Jell-O

I do a lot of school visits, and my large-group presentations are all question-and-answer, because I find that kids will ask about all the things I'm going to talk about anyway, but when it's motivated by them, they own it a little bit more. Of course, the downside of that is that I never quite know what questions they're going to ask—and the first question of the day always sets the tone for the rest of the presentation.

At one visit, there was this kid whose hand went up even before I finished putting out the call for questions. I could tell that this one was going to be one of those interesting ones. I call on the kid, and he asks:

"Mr. Shusterman, what drugs were you doing when you wrote *Full Tilt?*" (2003).

To which I responded, "Nothing but my own brain chemicals."

Which is true. Despite writing stories that might seem drug-induced, I was never into any sort of chemical stimulation. I didn't get high, I didn't drink all that much. I didn't drop acid. I was always kind of boring that way. Sorry to disappoint any of you who might be wondering. But I did have one major drug experience that I don't talk about much. I've decided to share it with you now.

About 10 years ago, I had gone with my sons Brendan and Jarrod on a trip to Playa del Carmen in the Yucatan Peninsula. It was a vacation, but a working one, because I was researching Chichen Itza, the ruins of the great Mayan city, for my novel *Everfound* (2011). This was the first major vacation with my son Brendan after his diagnosis and hospitialization for schizo-affective disorder. At this point, he was worlds better than he had been but was still on a pretty

powerful antipsychotic called Seroquel. Seroquel pills are very similar in shape and color to extra-strength Excedrin. Add to this fact that I, like a moron, decided to put all our medications into identical handy-dandy little Zip-loc bags so they'd take up less space, and you have a recipe for chemical disaster.

The morning of our Chichen Itza tour, I had a headache, so I downed a couple of extra-strength Excedrin as we were rushing to get out of our hotel room and to the tour bus. As I was swallowing, I realized that the pills felt a little bit large in my mouth, but it was too late. I had taken 800 milligrams of Seroquel—*twice* my son's dosage, a dosage his doctor had him slowly work up to.

I tried to induce vomiting with no success. I tried to call Poison Control and discovered there is no number for Poison Control in Mexico. I tried to find out what the lethal dosage of Seroquel was online and found this to be the one time in history that you couldn't find something on the Internet. Finally, I was able to get through to a psychopharmacologist at a local hospital who told me that 800 milligrams wasn't lethal. "You may get a little sleepy, though."

I may get a little sleepy. Fine. I can deal with that. So we got on the tour bus, and about half an hour later, I ceased to be able to feel my hands. And I suddenly realized that I no longer had any bones. I turned to Brendan and Jarrod and said. "Uhh Thurrrrk derr Srrmbptum Wrugggg."

Did any of you see *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Winter, 2013)? Do you remember the scene where Leo DiCaprio took two Quaaludes and tried to get down the front steps of a country club to his Lamborghini? That's *exactly* what it was like. The tour bus made an emergency stop, and I spilled out the door onto the pavement in front of some hotel somewhere. My sons, who were 19 and 17 at the time, had to physically carry me because I couldn't walk or speak. They tried to get me something to drink, but I couldn't swallow. They got me a juice box, figuring that would be easier for me, but I couldn't sip on the little straw. And

> **Despite writing stories that might seem drug-induced, I was never into any sort of chemical stimulation.**

everyone who passed was laughing. Look at this *bor-racho loco*, drunk at seven in the morning. So the boys folded me into a taxi, and we took it back to our hotel. They carried me to the room, tucked me in bed, and proceeded to spend 24 hours watching pay-per-view and ordering the most expensive items on the room-service menu—which, by the way, they deserved, because they rose to this occasion, dealing with a totally incapacitated father, in a foreign country, and managed to keep us all alive.

> **In the end, we are the sum of our experiences: the choices we've made; the times we put everything on the line, not knowing the outcome; the moments we grow up a little, even when we thought we had no growing up left to do; the accidental psychotropic journeys.**

What I remember most about those 24 hours is the feeling the medication gave me. It was like being encased in Jell-O. It took so much motivation to make the slightest physical or mental movement; just rolling over, or moving my arm, or thinking about anything left me complete-ly exhausted. I remember realizing I had to go to the bathroom. It took me half an hour just to make my body get out of the bed, and every step toward the bathroom felt like I was dragging a ball and chain on each foot.

And I realized—for the first time *understood* in a way that I never understood it before—how it felt to be heavily medicated during a psychotic episode. And this was a dose of what Brendan felt every day with his medication.

After the medication wore off, we went to Chichen Itza, two days late. On the bus back to our hotel, I talked with Brendan about the medication, about how it made me feel, and it turned out to be a bonding experience. It was also on that bus ride that I asked Brendan if he thought it might be okay if I wrote a book about mental illness. About the way the disease and the medications make you feel. About how reality can bend in such strange ways that you don't really know what's real anymore. And he said, "Yeah, you should write that. I'd like to read it."

So, while I would never wish an accidental Jell-O-encased anti-psychotic trip on anyone, I'm glad that it happened. Because if it hadn't, I might never have written *Challenger Deep* (2015).

In the end, we are the sum of our experiences: the choices we've made; the times we put everything on the line, not knowing the outcome; the moments we grow up a little, even when we thought we had no growing up left to do; the accidental psychotropic journeys. They inform us, mold us, teach us. "Life's little lessons," as my father would say.

I'd like to close with a quick look at what's on the horizon. In October of 2018, *Dry*, a book I co-wrote with my son Jarrod, will be published by Simon & Schuster. It's a survival story set in Southern California when the water supply actually runs out, and the thin veneer of civilization is stripped away over a period of one desperate week. There's a Holocaust-themed graphic novel coming from Scholastic called *Courage to Dream.* Also a stand-alone novel from HarperCollins called *Game Changer*, about a high school football player whose tackles are so hard, he bounces into alternate dimensions and is forced to see the world and his own life from vastly different per-spectives. There's also a new middle-grade series I'm co-writing with Eric Elfman to follow our Accelerati trilogy (2014, 2015, 2016). And, of course, there's the final book of the Arc of a Scythe trilogy (2016, 2018), *The Toll,* due out in September of 2019.

I suppose it's fitting, then, to have received this prestigious honor during a year when the conference theme is "The First Chapter . . ."

. . . because I'm just getting started!

Neal Shusterman is the New York Times *bestselling author of more than 30 award-winning books for children, teens, and adults, including* The Unwind Dystology, The Skinjacker trilogy, Full Tilt*, and* Challenger Deep*, which won the National Book Award.* Scythe*, the first book in his newest series, Arc of a Scythe, is a Michael L. Printz Honor Book. The second book in the series,* Thunderhead*, was published in January 2018 and debuted at number 3 on the* New York Times *bestseller list.* Dry*, co-written with his son Jarrod Shusterman, is on sale October 2, 2018, with film rights already sold to Paramount. Neal also writes screenplays for motion pictures and television shows. Visit him at Storyman.com and Facebook.com/ NealShusterman.*

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This issue of *The ALAN Review* is
dedicated to the life and work of
Richard Peck
(April 5,1934–May 23, 2018).
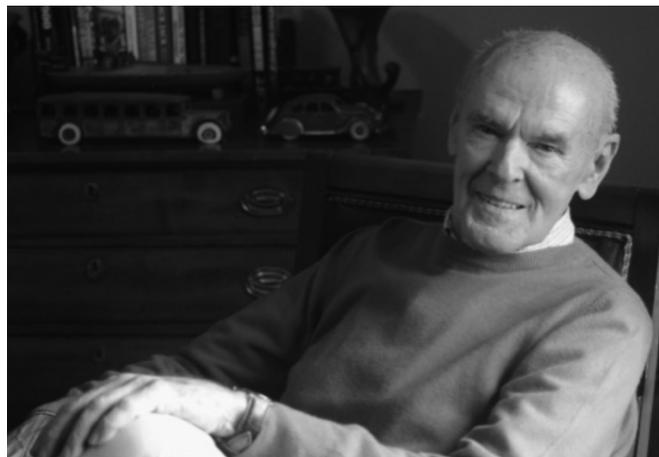
Photo credit: Sonya Sones

"If you cannot find yourself on the page very early in life,
you will go looking for yourself in all the wrong places."

Navigating Trauma through the Art of Fiction:

A Collaborative Conversation

From the Editors: In this collaborative conversation, we are excited to feature the voices of three authors for young adults whose books explore trauma in ways honest, challenging, and essential. We are grateful for their candor and sincerity as they share how their fiction creates space for contemplation and healing even in the midst of pain, sadness, and fear.

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 that in reading this conversation, you gain an increased appreciation for the ways in which these authors generate imagined characters who can provide guidance and reassurance to readers in the real world.

The experience of trauma is highly personal. How do you work to invite readers into the unique and individualized stories of your protagonists?

Nina: My characters' specific traumas are their own—it is fiction, after all—but the emotional core of how they are left feeling *after* the trauma always comes from my own experience. I remember teaching English Composition to high school freshmen and talking about Aristotle's theory of tragedy, that line where he says that characters should be "true to life and yet more beautiful." I take that concept and push it beyond characters and beyond beau-

ty—so that the exercise of writing fiction, for me, is to make sense of human experiences by entering the moments and episodes of a person's life and amplifying it all—the pain, the horror, the joy, the grief, and yes, the beauty—so that we can recognize our own experiences through the experiences of a character.

Meg: For me, it's important to develop the character as a complete person, someone relatable. I give her a strong voice, hopes, things she still dreams about, friends, enemies. I draw her completely so that a reader can find common ground with her, even though she is living in a difficult space that might be unfamiliar. As for the unique situation of that character, I keep the rules simple: No melodrama. No glossing over. I write the trouble as the girl would experience it, and I allow the reader to see how the whole girl is pressured and reshaped by those circumstances.

Chelsea: Books are magical because they transport us—not only to other worlds, but into other *people*. Readers may never experience life exactly like the characters in their favorite novels, but they can *feel* as if they do. Authors accomplish this by writing characters as authentically as possible. Readers should never feel like bystanders to someone else's tragedy. They should be in the characters' heads, living life alongside them. In this way, even deeply personal traumas can become relatable.

How would you respond to a hesitant reader's concern that traumatic experiences are too sad or unpleasant or emotionally difficult to navigate?

Chelsea: I've never felt that writers should shy away from difficult topics. The world can be a dark place, and literature—at least some literature—should reflect that. Sometimes readers even *need* that. People who are struggling or feeling alone might find it therapeutic to read about characters in similar situations. With that being said, no readers should ever feel forced to read a book they're not comfortable with. Though novels serve many purposes, from education to entertainment, they should never cause *harm*. I'd remind a hesitant reader that it's always okay to put a book down if reading it is too painful.

Nina: I agree with Chelea completely about never causing harm through our work, especially since we write for young people. That said, I would say that art often *is* the way to navigate trauma. We hear and read and watch stories of loss and trauma when we are young, and then, if we are lucky enough to not be children anymore when significant loss or tragedy first impacts our lives, we have at least some memory of processing it. Take William Steig's (1969) picturebook *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*, for example, which is the story of a donkey who turns to stone. We are afraid for Sylvester when he turns into rock and can't go back to his family. We watch his parents mourn his loss—experience true and deep grief—and then we see joy return. Of course, in real life, if we lose someone, that person usually doesn't come back to life after making a wish with a pebble, but still, even as we experience loss and grief through the story, we are assured that the sun comes up again and that, with time, there is healing.

Meg: My books aren't for everyone or for every age, and I allow young readers to make that call for themselves. But it's important to me that teachers and librarians not make that decision for readers. To me, that's a bigger problem. Sometimes, very well-meaning adults create obstacles between kids and books. They decide that a book is for a certain kind of reader who faces particular circumstances, or that it's for a reader who is "ready" to read

about a given topic. This is a huge disservice. It's vital that kids choose what they read. So-called "difficult books" can help them make sense of the harder parts of their lives, sometimes the parts that they can't share with others. And books can also help them understand others better, helping them transcend the limitations of their own lived experience.

How much of you is present in the stories you craft?

Nina: So much. Too much, sometimes! But most of the time, it is carefully disguised.

Meg: That depends on what you mean by "me." I often use a real-life incident as the seed for a novel, but I do not write memoir. The plot and characters are never a retelling of facts. What *is* completely true are the questions the main character has about her circumstances, the emotional truth of what it feels like to be facing her dilemma. Those things cut very close to the bone, and I pull them from what I remember in my own life. It's what I find most terrifying and healing about the writing process. It allows me to excavate all the things I wrestled with as a young woman and lay them bare.

Chelsea: I try not to write characters *too* much like me (after all, part of the fun of writing is creating characters who do things I'd never dream of!), but it's impossible to leave myself out of a story entirely. I think, to some extent, most writers pull from real life when crafting characters and worlds, and I'm no exception. It's important to me that my books feel honest. I want my characters' emotions to feel *real*. To make that happen, it's sometimes necessary to draw from my own experiences, both the pleasant and the painful.

How do you hope teachers might use your titles in their classrooms?

Meg: I want teachers to allow the books to breathe in the hands of students. I always shudder to think about vocabulary lists or forcing kids to do plot recaps. I think it's more meaningful to ask kids to discuss a character to whom they had a strong reaction, positive or negative, or to ask them to find

the connections between the events in my novels and what is happening in their lives right now, whether it's bullying or police shootings or issues of Latino identity, etc.

Chelsea: Some teenagers are best reached through stories—I know this because I was one of them. During a particularly difficult time in my adolescence, I struggled with discussing my real thoughts and feelings, whether it was with my parents, teachers, or even therapists. But I *loved* books. Sometimes I loved them for the escape, but other times I loved them for their realism. I could read a book and find a character in a situation that reflected my own. And when I discussed those books and characters, I was able to talk about my feelings in a circumspect way. I hope educators use my novels similarly: by using fiction to reach the truth.

Nina: One aspect of being a high school English teacher that I most loved was watching book discussions work on different levels. I loved close reading and analysis—taking a passage and discovering all the meaning held within it. But I also thrived on those big thematic conversations that were sparked from the books we read—conversations that became powerful examinations of life and human nature. Thinking that my books are being used in any of these ways makes me profoundly grateful.

Are your works ultimately hopeful?

Chelsea: I like to think my books are ultimately hopeful. Now, that doesn't mean everything works out perfectly for my characters, or that their stories are wrapped up neatly. They've been through hard times and faced difficult truths about themselves and the world around them, and part of that pain will always be with them. But having experienced trauma doesn't mean the characters' lives are over. They haven't *become* their pain. They'll wake up, ready to face a new day, maybe even stronger and wiser than before—and as long as people are able to pick themselves up and keep going, there will *always* be hope.

Nina: Oh, yes. I keep thinking I will write something darker one of these days—in fact I'm working on

something a little darker right now—but I can already feel the hope slipping in. I guess I can't help myself! Hope is necessary for all of us in life, so it also feels necessary to me in fiction.

Meg: I think so. Not every novel concludes with the character finding a solution to all her problems, but I try to end with the character able to take the next step forward. That's the most realistic way to deal with tough stories. In life, it's rare that all troubles vanish. What's more likely is that we learn how to survive, how to sidestep the obstacles and go on.

Nina LaCour is the author of the Michael L. Printz Award-winning novel We Are Okay*, as well as the William Morris Honor novel* Hold Still *and the widely acclaimed* The Disenchantments *and* Everything Leads to You*. She is also the coauthor, with David Levithan, of* You Know Me Well*. Formerly a bookseller and high school English teacher, she is now on the faculty of Hamline University's MFAC program. A San Francisco Bay Area native, Nina lives with her wife and daughter in Northern California. You can visit her at www.ninalacour.com.*

Meg Medina is the author of numerous prize-winning works for teens, including Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*, which received the Pura Belpré Award in 2014, and* Burn Baby Burn*, which was long-listed for the 2016 National Book Award and was a finalist for both the* Kirkus *Prize and the* Los Angeles Times *Book Award. She is a founding member of We Need Diverse Books, a faculty member of Hamline University in its MFA program for children's writing, and on the Board of Advisors for SCBWI. When she's not writing, she works on community projects that promote diversity in children's literature, especially those with a focus on Latino youth and girls.*

Chelsea Sedoti is the author of the young adult novels The Hundred Lies of Lizzie Lovett *and* As You Wish*. Before becoming a writer, Chelsea explored careers as a balloon twister, filmmaker, and paranormal investigator. Eventually she realized her true passion is telling stories about flawed teenagers just as strange as she is. When she's not at the computer, Chelsea spends her time exploring abandoned buildings, eating junk food at roadside diners, and trying to befriend every animal in the world. She lives in Las Vegas, Nevada, where she avoids casinos but loves roaming the Mojave Desert.*

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Amber **Moore**

We Believe Her:

Sexual Assault and Friend/Ally/ship in *Exit, pursued by a bear*

E. K. Johnson's young adult novel *Exit, pursued by a bear* (2016) offers a useful case study for examining intersections of gender, identity, sexual trauma, allyship, and young adult literature (YAL). Unlike much YAL that addresses sexual assault, this text stands apart due to its almost fantastical depiction of allyship—of central concern in this article—in Hermione's community. Here, allyship is nearly fantastical because it is divergently *visible*, at home and in public; these spaces are interconnected and rely on one another, and this solidarity moves across lines of gender and age. Simply, the sexual assault survivor protagonist, Hermione, and her queer best friend, Polly, are both surrounded by people willing to act as allies for them and to demonstrate solidarity. Thus, this story highlights relationships among characters engaged in processes of unsettling dominant power dynamics and patriarchal ideologies.

The story follows Hermione Winters, a high school cheerleader who is raped at summer camp after being drugged at a dance. She is found unconscious, "underwear gone . . . up to her waist in water, lying on rocks [lakeside]" (p. 58). Throughout the novel, Hermione grapples with the aftermath, including living in fear of not knowing her assailant, coping with frightening flashbacks, returning to school, and experiencing an unwanted pregnancy and consequent abortion as a result of rape. However, throughout her survivorship, Hermione never stands alone; her friends, family, and community rally around to offer support and solidarity in myriad ways, to the point that Hermione states, "I have trouble remembering that I'm a victim at all. That makes it hard to act like one" (p. 71). Hermione's best friend, Polly, is especially supportive throughout the story. She goes out of her way to act as an ally for Hermione—work that Hermione eventually tries to reciprocate when Polly comes out as a queer woman.

In this article, I contribute to a body of scholarship that examines how sexual assault is taken up in YAL (Altrows, 2016; Bott, 2006; Cleveland & Durand, 2014; Malo-Juvera, 2014; Marshall, 2009; Snider, 2014, among others). I argue that *Exit, pursued by a bear* uniquely portrays female adolescent friendships as sites of resistance, critical dialogue, support, survival, and allyship, particularly in response to sexual violence. The friend/ally/ship between Hermione and her queer best friend, Polly, functions as a space wherein their shared critical interrogation of rape culture effectively combats it. This novel is perhaps best understood as an exemplar tale; though imperfect, it offers to adolescent readers best practices for how they might act as allies, primarily for sexual assault survivors and secondarily for queer youth. To make this argument, I first draw from scholarship on ally work (Brown & Ostrove, 2013; DeTurk, 2011; Gaffney, 2016; Munin & Speight, 2010; Rich, 2003; Tasker, Peter, & Horn, 2014), most extensively from Hunt and Holmes's (2015) conception of "both/and" allyship as a way to understand how allyship can be fostered in fiction through female friendships that empower female characters, especially the survivor protagonist, to be agentic. Next, I engage with theories of social capital (Bourdieu, 2013; Yosso, 2005) to examine the

limits of such allyship, namely how this practice is not neutral and can reveal tensions that must also be attended to in an exploration of literary depiction of youth solidarity practices.

Allyship and the "Both/And" Approach

As Gaffney (2016) argues, "Being an ally means recognizing oppression broadly and standing in solidarity with anyone who experiences oppression, whether or not the ally also belongs to the targeted group" (p. 44). The type of allyship illustrated in *Exit, pursued by a bear* functions as an example of a "both/and" approach, for which Hunt and Holmes (2015) also advocate. Focused on decolonial allyship, particularly in relation to queer relationships and Indigenous cultures, they posit that a "both/and" approach honors "the intimate and often invisible practices" that exist in "home and family spaces" in connection with "other acts of solidarity . . . across much wider sociospatial contexts as well" (p. 167). This notion emerged from critically considering their own friendship, as both are "cisgender queer women, one of whom is Indigenous and one of whom is a white settler" (p. 154). Because activism is typically "seen" in public spaces, Hunt and Holmes explore their friendship and allyship as it unfolds in more private realms—within their friendship, homes, and family lives. Revealing that their friend/ally/ship is housed largely in "daily conversations and actions that seek to make space for [them]selves . . . families . . . and partners in the context of a racist, homophobic, and heteronormative patriarchy conditioned through colonialism" (p. 155), their article examines what a decolonial ally approach looks like in the everyday (p. 156).

This conceptualization of allyship is useful when evaluating YAL, particularly stories where allyship

> [T]he depiction of a "both/and" approach to allyship in *Exit, pursued by a bear* serves as a productive example of the value of the intimate geographies of adolescent friendships, particularly female friendships[.]

is needed, such as in sexual assault narratives and stories involving queer characters and issues. How solidarity is portrayed (or not) is crucial, as these texts hold potentially influential power. As Rice (2013) argues, "Reading . . . books [about overcoming hardship] . . . can be the pivot point for moving from despair to hope" (p. 29), and ". . . injustices brought to light by books . . . expose issues impacting girls that are not commonly confronted but that adults well know exist" (p. 32). As such, the depiction of a "both/and" approach to allyship in *Exit, pursued by a bear* serves as a productive example of the value of the intimate geographies of adolescent friendships, particularly female friendships, as the characters avoid speaking "*for* . . . loved ones without their consent while also creating spaces in which [they] can be called on as allies when desired" (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 168). Hermione and Polly practice such "both/and" allyship for one another and, in some cases, for others. However, it is also important to attend to how allyship is not a "neutral or uncomplicated" (p. 164) endeavor, as Hunt and Holmes remind us. Thus, the complex, dynamic unfolding representation of "both/and" allyship in *Exit, pursued by a bear* is powerful, if imperfect.

"What Polly and I have is forever": Allied "Soulmate" Friends in *Exit*

In *Exit, pursued by a bear*, allyship emerges discursively throughout Hermione's community and beyond. However, it is rooted most firmly in her friendship with Polly. As such, an overview of how female friendships are typically depicted in YAL provides a foundation for understanding how *Exit* stands apart; Polly functions as an intimate "star" ally, a kind of soulmate with near-animalistic protective instincts for Hermione, and attends to her role as ally quietly when necessary, even in the background of the story.

Fractured Female Friendships in YAL: A Legacy
Feminist theorists have long established the significance of close female bonds, particularly through work done in the 1970s through the 1990s (Murrenus Pilmaier, 2016, p. 150). As Adrienne Rich (2003) famously argued, "It is women who make life endurable for each other, give physical affection without causing pain, share, advise, and stick by each other" (p. 33).

Certainly, "Female friendship is a critical community for most young women" (Hassel & Clasen, 2016, p. 9). Yet despite this, YAL unfortunately carries a legacy of producing unhealthy, reductive portrayals of female friendships. As Christian-Smith (1987) argues, "The way novels treat friendships between girls exemplifies selectivity, [and] there is often a breach in the relationship between best girlfriends" (p. 402). Further, as Suico (2016) discusses, such problematic depictions of female friendships remain prevalent in YAL, such as through contrasting character tropes wherein a dichotomy is often set up between a "good girl" and her foil, an "other girl" (p. 17). In such stories, girls are often combative, with the good girls being rewarded for their manners, self-restraint, chastity, and beauty, while the other girls are punished for their forwardness, promiscuousness, and cunning or manipulative ways. However, *Exit, pursued by a bear* provides great relief from this reductive literary device, as Hermione's female friendships, particularly her connection with Polly, are sources of happiness, solidarity, and support; rather than maligning each other, the girls consistently align themselves with one another.

Sexual Assault Survivors in YAL: *Speak* (1999) as a Case Study

As Bott (2006) argues, "Sex is always a controversial topic in young adult literature, with rape being one of the edgiest of topics. Trying to pretend rape does not exist is dangerously ignorant" (p. 26). As such, many scholars have taken up investigating the experiences of sexual assault survivors in YA literature, both in terms of literary analysis (see, for example, Altrows, 2016; Bickford, 2012; Detora, 2006; Hubler, 2017) and in the classroom (see, for example, Bickmore, 2008; Bott, 2006; Marshall, 2009).

Consider as a case study the critically acclaimed and widely taught novel *Speak* (1999) by Laurie Halse Anderson, a story about a survivor's struggle in the wake of her assault. Melinda, the protagonist, experiences silence and isolation, a stark contrast to Hermione in *Exit, pursued by a bear*. Many scholars have investigated the literary qualities of *Speak* (Ames, 2006; Day, 2013; Detora, 2006; Hubler, 2017; Latham, 2006; McGee, 2009; O'Quinn, 2001; Schiffman, 2012; Snider, 2014, among others), as well as student responses to this text (Alsup, 2003; Dykstra, 2013; Jackett, 2007; Malo-Juvera, 2014; McGee, 2009;

Moore & Begoray, 2017; Park, 2012; Sprague, Keeling, & Lawrence, 2006; Tannert-Smith, 2010; Xu, 2008; Zigo & Derrico, 2008, among others). Hubler (2017) recently launched a discussion on rape in YA fiction by "credit[ing]" the novel "with propagating a feminist perspective on rape that young readers might not otherwise access" (p. 114). While many attest to the power of *Speak*, it is also important to confront that this story chronicles the painful experience of a survivor left to cope with the aftermath of rape, alone. Unlike Hermione, Melinda experiences ostracization by her peer group, neglect by her family, and even oversights by several teachers, resulting in her mutism "that is the real focus of the book . . . as she struggles with whether she should talk to someone, how she can talk, and exactly what she would say" (McGee, 2009, p. 173). Although Melinda does not disclose her rape until near the close of the novel, she is nevertheless visibly suffering throughout the story, and few individuals step up to actually speak to her, let alone exhibit ally behavior.

> **YAL unfortunately carries a legacy of producing unhealthy, reductive portrayals of female friendships.**

For instance, in *Speak,* previous to Melinda's rape and the start of the book, her closest friend was Rachel Bruin, her now "ex-best friend" (p. 5), who Tannert-Smith (2010) describes as "the ex-friend who keeps changing shape" (p. 403). When we are first introduced to Rachel, she "has certainly grown up in the transition to high school: she is dating a senior, wears make-up, and hangs out with foreign exchange students (who noticeably increase her cool factor)" (Schiffman, 2012, unpaginated). It is also clear that she is no ally, or even acquaintance to, Melinda anymore, despite Melinda's clear need for Rachel to fill this role:

> Words climb up my throat. This was the girl who suffered through Brownies with me, who taught me how to swim, who understood about my parents, who didn't make fun of my bedroom. If there is anyone in the entire galaxy I am dying to tell what really happened, it's Rachel. My throat burns. (p. 5)

We soon discover that these climbing, burning words are the testimony of Melinda's rape. However,

in the same moment that it is revealed how desperately Melinda craves a friend and ally like Polly in *Exit, pursued by a bear*, how she almost seems to expect it with her body's anticipatory physical reaction to seeing Rachel, Rachel's eyes meet Melinda's and she mouths, "I hate you" (p. 5), before turning her back. Rachel's anger toward Melinda continues throughout the novel so that she is not merely an ex-best friend, but rather a seething enemy. Melinda's comments attesting to this, such as, "Rachel might slit my throat on her new carpet" (p. 32), start to add up. Much later, when Melinda attempts to act as an ally for Rachel, to warn her when she starts dating Melinda's rapist, Rachel reacts with fury: "Liar! . . . You're jealous. You're a twisted little freak . . . you are so sick" (p. 184). Not even when Melinda is vindicated by her truth being made public does Rachel return to Melinda's life in a meaningful way; after "everyone [finds out] what happened," Melinda returns home to discover a mere "message on the machine from Rachel. She wants me to call her" (p. 297). As such, even though many scholars argue that the novel "ends on a high note," "with the protagonist speaking and brave, ready to talk about her rape" (Snider, 2014, p. 301), Melinda is still denied the allyship a survivor deserves, an allyship represented by Polly and Hermione's solidarity work in *Exit, pursued by a bear*.

> **Allies are few and far between for YA rape survivors, which is what makes *Exit* and its protagonist, Hermione, so refreshing and hopeful.**

Therefore, while much scholarship examines the experiences of sexual assault survivors in YA fiction, many investigations address the all-too-common experiences of lonely, isolated protagonists. Allies are few and far between for YA rape survivors, which is what makes *Exit* and its protagonist, Hermione, so refreshing and hopeful.

Polly as Star Ally: The Exemplar Character for Acts of Solidarity

Many characters act as allies for Hermione. Her "constellation of intimates" (Bergman, 2013, p. 31) includes parents, teammates, her cheerleading coach,

police officers, healthcare workers, neighbors, teachers, and a reverend, who all show solidarity and offer help in myriad ways. Hermione even senses a kinship with the ghost of Clara Abbey, a deceased drunk driving victim, whom she imagines speaking to her at several moments in the text. However, Polly stands apart from this supportive crowd. Hermione makes it clear from the outset that despite having a boyfriend, her true soulmate is Polly, her "superhero" (p. 112), claiming, "What Polly and I have is forever" (p. 43). Hermione and Polly's connection remains unwavering, with Polly immediately becoming Hermione's champion as ally after the rape, protecting Hermione from others, as well as (potentially) from Hermione herself. For instance, early on, Polly threatens Hermione's boyfriend when he is disrespectful to Hermione: "Get your ass to your cabin . . . if I *ever* hear you talk like that about any girl . . . I will skin you" (p. 38). Later, when Hermione wakes up in the hospital following her rape, Polly "[does]n't let go of [her] hand" (pp. 51, 67). However, one of the more outstanding examples of Polly's loyalty occurs after a reporter victim-blames Hermione while interviewing Hermione and Polly about cheerleading; the reporter deviates from her line of questioning to address Hermione's sexual assault. Polly, "practically on fire," challenges: "You wouldn't think to ask a boy how he would avoid raping someone?" Hermione observes that she's "never seen a grown up recoil like this" and that the reporter "rocks back as if Polly had struck her" (p. 194).

This moment is important in two central respects. First, together the girls co-construct a space to combat rape culture in challenging the reporter's offensive, problematic line of questioning, often seen in contemporary media; as Gravelin (2016) argues, "by blaming victims . . . media may be promoting a rape-tolerant culture" (p. 58). Next, because Polly as ally refrains from dominating the situation, Polly resists speaking "*for* her loved one" (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 168). Instead, she helps to facilitate Hermione's agentic self-advocacy, demonstrated at the beginning and conclusion of this exchange. As the interview commences, Hermione can "feel Polly start to boil over and then rein herself in," because Polly "mak[es] [her] take the lead" (p. 193). After Polly's retort, Hermione feels a wave of empowerment; it "gives [her] balance, like Polly has caught [her] out of the air and put [her] on

[her] feet again" (p. 194). Hermione is then able to exercise agency by drawing the interview to a close, issuing a warning to the reporter: "Your article had better not have anything other than . . . quotes about cheerleading in it. I can start a letter-writing campaign like you wouldn't believe" (pp. 194–195).

Here, similar to the way Hunt and Holmes (2016) describe their own connection, Hermione and Polly's "friendship develop[s] through undertaking collaborative action to foster . . . conversation about violence [and] gender" (p. 161). Ultimately, these moments exemplify how Polly is an intimate ally for Hermione, "willing to take action, either interpersonally or in larger social settings . . . mov[ing] beyond self-regulation or prejudice" (Brown & Ostrove, 2013, p. 2212). Overall, their friendship functions as a space wherein critical interrogation significantly contributes to challenging rape culture, in that their resistance might encourage the reporter (whose position holds a degree of influence) to reconsider her thinking about and treatment of sexual assault issues.

Animal Ally Instincts: Polly's Ferociously Protective Nature

Polly's protective nature and intuition regarding what kind of support Hermione needs often appear to the reader as almost instinctual reflexes. For example, when Hermione reveals that the first time she thought of herself as "broken," Polly would not "let" her (p. 81); all Hermione needs is to look at Polly to "forget[] [she] is damaged" (p. 84). Though such instances of self-blame and doubt are rare, due to Hermione's clear sense of self and the ally support she receives, Polly nevertheless quickly intervenes to empower her to avoid thinking poorly of herself. In fact, Polly's consistently fierce protectiveness can almost be characterized as animalistic; she is truly a "fighting bear," their school's mascot and cheerleading focus. As Ronnberg and Martin (2011) argue, the bear has numerous symbolic possibilities, such as being representative of a "spiritual helper" or "mythic hero"; the bear is also associated with "healing powers" alongside its "wild and massive," "immensely powerful" nature (p. 272). Further, early on, Polly is described as "a thing of fearsome beauty" (p. 47)—"all teeth and ferocity" (p. 119), "eat[ing] fear for breakfast" (p. 147). In this way, Polly uses her intensity and outrage at Hermione's rape, both creatively and generatively, to enhance Hermione's ability to cope and to make her feel protected during the fallout following her assault. Returning to Rich (2003), Polly's ferocity in her friendship to Hermione is arguably an example of how their allied soulmate bond is something of a "survival relationship," demonstrating how "women . . . must be one another's allies, mentors, and comforters in the female struggle for survival" (p. 36).

Allyship, Even When No One Is Looking: Polly's Solidarity Work behind the Scenes

Polly endeavors to act as a good friend and ally to Hermione behind the scenes, fulfilling the "need for support to occur both when . . . people are present and when they are not" (Brown & Ostrove, 2013, p. 2212). This begins even at the beginning of the novel, before Hermione is cognizant that she has been raped; she awakens in the hospital to see Polly's face, "so white" (p. 51) because Polly stayed with her all night. Then, when the girls return to school in the fall, Polly works to ensure that Hermione's transition following the attack is as smooth as possible, including shutting down Jenny, a teammate spreading rumors about Hermione's attack because of her own insecurities. When Hermione confronts her, Jenny makes excuses for herself with, "It was just that I *knew* something . . . [usually] no one's interested in what I have to say." When Jenny assures Hermione that she "has [her] back, now," Hermione immediately knows without asking that this is because "Polly [already] threatened [her]" (p. 92).

Polly is also mindful of ensuring that Hermione feels physically safe at school, "sav[ing] a seat in the classes [they] have together" (p. 98). Such tireless efforts to make starting the school year as painless as possible for Hermione do not go unnoticed by the adults in their lives, either; when Hermione visits the guidance counselor to discuss her sexual assault, the

> **Hermione and Polly's connection remains unwavering, with Polly immediately becoming Hermione's champion as ally after the rape, protecting Hermione from others, as well as (potentially) from Hermione herself.**

counselor remarks, "If I had a friend like Polly Olivier, I'd probably have done more dueling in my youth" (p. 101).

"I will spend the rest of my life making this up to her": Ally Work and Reciprocity

As Vaquera and Kao (2008) argue, reciprocity is a quality of friendship often assumed: "In general, reciprocity is one of the expectations about affective relations"; however, "not all friendships are created equal, and certainly not all friendships are reciprocal by default" (p. 55). *Exit* extends beyond functioning as an excellent example of how "not all friendships are created equal." Indeed, Hermione and Polly's relationship exemplifies how powerful reciprocity can be between friends and allies. In *Exit, pursued by a bear,* friend/ally/ship is not unilateral; rather, reciprocal ally work moves back and forth between characters consistently, demonstrating that "allies exist across identity lines" (Gaffney, 2016, pp. 43–44). These "dynamics of solidarity across . . . interconnected identities and positionalities" (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 163) are central to this story as Hermione and Polly endeavor to consistently reciprocate compassion and solidarity. This duo demonstrates through friend/ally/ship hooks' (2015) emphasis on how "bonds of care and commitment" emerge in contexts of reciprocity to "enable[] sustained love . . . [that allows] men and women to nurture one another, to grow fully and freely" (p. 131).

> Following her rape, Hermione does not merely sit back to "collect" the support she is "owed." Rather, she continues her ally work, especially when Polly comes out as gay.

The Ally Athlete
From the beginning, Hermione is established as an ally figure, particularly for her younger cheerleading teammates during cheer summer camp; this is evidenced when she chastises herself for not remembering a name, telling herself "that's inexcusable. I have to be better" (p. 2). Later, an especially telling mo-

ment unfolds when Hermione decides to give a controversial speech to her team during an annual cheer camp bonfire, without advance permission from her coaches to dive into the risky subject matter. Risking punitive repercussions, she reminds everyone to be sexually safe, explicitly addressing the issue of teenage pregnancy. When her boyfriend, a fellow cheerleader, criticizes her efforts because she "basically told everyone that girls shouldn't have sex," she defends herself by saying, "I told everyone to be careful" (p. 28).

Hermione consistently encourages her teammates to work together throughout the novel, stressing the importance of supportive group dynamics. Repeatedly, Hermione productively taps into her social capital as realized in her linguistic capital—the "intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" (Yosso, 2005, p. 78)—as a head cheerleader and stresses the necessity of solidarity. Using what Yosso (2005) chronicles as qualities of linguistic capital, including "attention to detail, dramatic pauses, comedic timing, facial affect, vocal tone, volume" (p. 79) and so forth, Hermione successfully urges her team to "come together and solve . . . problems" (p. 11) during training; she is confident that she is leading a team that "has her back" (p. 36). As such, she fosters an atmosphere in which being supportive and good to those around you is paramount.

Authoring a Straight Ally Identity
Following her rape, Hermione does not merely sit back to "collect" the support she is "owed." Rather, she continues her ally work, especially when Polly comes out as gay. As Hunt and Holmes (2015) argue, "friendships can provide opportunities for enacting allyship and a decolonial queer praxis, while raising questions about reciprocity and accountability across axes of difference" (p. 161), and Hermione seizes such an opportunity. In fact, Hermione is horrified at herself for being "too self-involved to notice [that Polly is gay]," calling it the most "selfish," "worst thing" she's ever done in her life; she is so distraught that she immediately "vomit[s] all over the floor" (p. 155). Hermione's intense reaction to Polly's coming out is perhaps a response to her "realization of otherness," where she "came face-to-face with the realization of the Other (an outgroup member or oppressed member of society)" (Munin & Speight, 2010, p. 257).

Munin and Speight (2010) argue that this realization is pivotal for potential allies, as it shows them a "worldview apart from their privilege" (p. 257). From this moment, Hermione seizes the opportunity to act as a straight ally for Polly, who is concerned about coming out to her community and family.

Hermione's eagerness to act as ally for Polly is clearly illustrated by her disappointment in not being invited to Polly's coming-out discussion with her parents. This is the first time Polly is going to address her sexuality with them, and she wants to do so independently, by herself, and without the physical support of Hermione's presence. Such a disappointed reaction demonstrates Hermione's "desire to do something or to be changed through a shared experience and knowledge"; she is keen to be active in a "friendship of solidarity that honors and celebrates" (Hunt & Holmes, 2016, p. 161) Polly's queer identity. However, despite feeling hurt, Hermione recognizes the importance of knowing her place as an ally and respecting boundaries, much like Polly did when she held back during the fiery exchange with the victim-blaming reporter.

Hermione understands that Polly needs to be in control when Hermione reciprocates acts of allyship. Drawing from her own experiences, Hermione chronicles: "I'm not there when Polly comes out to her parents. That hurts a bit, but I know what it's like to do something alone, so I can't really hold a grudge" (p. 186). Hermione's musing that she thought she'd "be able to control [her own] ending" signals that she especially understands the importance of people controlling their own experiences, whether that be a healing process in the aftermath of sexual assault or a process of bravery with coming out to one's family. Furthermore, regardless of Hermione's absence during Polly's family meeting, Polly "still calls . . . almost every night before . . . bed" (p. 186), demonstrating an ongoing chain of supportive discussions. Overall, the girls' constellation of conversations becomes a site of change, growth, and strengthened understanding. Certainly, "it is in these intimate acts of reciprocity that . . . relationships with allyship are formed" (Hunt & Holmes, 2016, p. 163).

"I've been . . . pretty lousy . . . in terms of reciprocation": Ally Work and Self-reflection
Gaffney (2016) argues that while there is "no blue-print" for acting as an ally, "being effective requires significant self-reflection" (p. 44). Hunt and Holmes (2015) also argue that reflexivity is a critical piece in ally work; without it, we risk creating problematic tensions. Hermione is consistently mindful about both receiving and providing acts of solidarity. Of course, Hermione always makes notes of Polly's exhaustive efforts to make her feel safe and supported, such as telling Polly, "You are the best ever," then admonishing herself with "I don't tell her that enough" (p. 65). However, Hermione's self-reflection in her ally work is perhaps best illustrated after Polly comes out to her. In response, Hermione is cautious at many junctures, ready to show support while being mindful to note when to back away and respect Polly's boundaries as she explores this aspect of her identity more publicly for the first time.

> [T]he girls' constellation of conversations becomes a site of change, growth, and strengthened understanding.

Self-policing Ally Work
One of the first instances where Hermione demonstrates self-reflective ally work occurs in the minutes following Polly coming out to her. Hermione immediately demonstrates mindful cautiousness; because the conversation happens at Hermione's home, she is careful to keep it hidden. She "check[s] on [her] parents, who are migrating towards the living room, and then leans over to Polly" (p. 160) before speaking, so the adults do not hear the girls' conversation. Next, in remembering her promise to her psychiatrist to always tell him the truth during her post-rape therapy, she self-admonishes: "Shit . . . so I kind of promised [Dr. Hutt] I would tell him the truth, which means theoretically I have to tell him about you. But he's really good at the confidentiality thing" (p. 160). As such, Hermione is sure to gain Polly's blessing, studying her reaction closely to ensure "there is nothing insincere" (p. 160) in her granting of permission.

Hermione is especially self-reflective in how she presents herself as an ally to Polly's budding romance with fellow teammate, Amy, when the three of them spend time together. Hermione carefully considers

how her presence might impact their romantic dynamic and self-monitors accordingly. As an example, the first time they all hang out socially after Hermione is told about their relationship, she admits feeling "very, very intrusive" (p. 165), demonstrating her inner struggle while navigating her new straight ally identity. However, "Polly sits down beside Amy and takes her hand like they're the only two people in the room" (p. 165), reassuring Hermione that her presence does not interfere with their intimacy. This display of affection signals that Hermione is successfully presenting herself as an ally. Further, Hermione endeavors to observe and admire their romance, calling it "the sweetest thing I have ever seen in my life . . ." (p. 166). Later, at the school dance, Hermione notices when another friend, Brenda, "links arms with [Hermione]," which "makes it look totally natural when Polly links arms with Amy" (p. 167), and they all go into the dance together. This demonstrates Hermione's attention to even the micro-gestures that she can enact to support Polly. In this way, Hermione carefully attends to the business of ally work in a manner that is observant, thoughtful, and reflexive.

> Hermione builds on her ally work by engaging in LGBTQ-affirming behavior through voicing or demonstrating support for Polly in a number of moments

Engaging in LGBTQ-Affirming Behavior

Hermione also engages in LGBTQ-affirming behavior, specifically "voicing support" (Poteat, 2015, p. 1494), illustrating how peers can indeed be "a major source for connection and support during adolescence" (p. 1495). As Poteat (2015) argues, critical thinking coupled with self-reflection "may be crucial for engaging in affirming behavior because, as dominant group members, heterosexuals may not otherwise recognize heterosexual privilege" (p. 1495). Hermione builds on her ally work by engaging in LGBTQ-affirming behavior through voicing or demonstrating support for Polly in a number of moments.

One such instance occurs when Polly and Amy sleep over at Hermione's home. Hermione is careful to make them feel comfortable sleeping close

together in her presence. She uses humor as a tool in an effort to mitigate Amy's anxiety about the situation, since Hermione "can't tell if she's worried about [Hermione] being crowded or being a third wheel" (p. 175). Hermione sympathizes, reflecting that Amy's concerns are "fair" because she's "not sure either," so she endeavors to break the tension with teasing: "I'm sleeping on the edge [of the bed], and I'm not sharing a mattress with Polly. She kicks" (p. 175). As a result, there is "a lot of laughing [during] . . . final preparations for bed" (p. 175).

Hermione continues to pay attention to how, for the rest of the night, the girls "keep their hands *mostly* to themselves" (my emphasis; p. 175), demonstrating that Hermione's indirect voicing of support for them to not only date but also to physically express their relationship is having an impact. Further, Hermione critically reflects on her actions, wondering if maybe she should have "insisted they sleep at Polly's house instead" (p. 175), so that they might have more privacy to be more intimate. Thus, Hermione supports not only their emotional romantic connection, but also their sexual expressions, even as she herself grapples with the notion of sex in the wake of her rape, wondering if "maybe someday I'll be able to have sex with someone" (p. 176).

"I love every person in this room": Ally Work Is Not Neutral

As Hunt and Holmes (2015) argue, allyship is always "fraught with tensions," as it is "not a neutral or uncomplicated process" (p. 164). Allies risk reproducing oppressive dynamics, such as leaving privilege unchecked, if they are not mindful. Therefore, a matter to be considered is the characters' positionalities and the extent to which social capital enables Hermione and Polly to be 1) allies and 2) in positions to be so supported by allies. To begin with, they possess a number of "dominant/agent identities" (DeTurk, 2011, p. 565), as both are white, cisgender, and able-bodied; where they differ is in sexuality, which is revealed over halfway through the text when Polly comes out. As a result of their positionalities, they both have access to build significant social capital. Yosso (2005) describes social capital as "networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional

support" (p. 79). Such capital is, of course, fraught with power; as Bourdieu (2013) argues, "Any capital, whatever form it assumes, exerts a symbolic violence as soon as it is recognized" (p. 298). Therefore, social capital is critical when considering the near-fantastical level of allyship in this story.

On Being a Popular Ally: Self-confidence and Social Capital

In many of their relationships, Hermione and Polly are in "power-over" positions with their peers as co-head, senior cheerleaders with outgoing personalities who are incredibly popular; such status increases their capacity for acting as allies. A standout example of this is how both girls only rarely need to assert their influence; rather, the novel is filled with moments illustrated by this scene: "Without a word, [Mallory] gives . . . captains choice of top bunk [at cheer camp]" (p. 9). This is because they possess a popularity that is described by Hermione as "pretty much made of Teflon" (p. 159). Accordingly, they are keenly aware of the power they hold and use it for effect; when Hermione makes a speech to the entire cheerleading camp, "everyone's eyes are locked on [her]," so she "drop[s]" her voice to near "whispering" for dramatic effect and can "feel the whole camp lean towards [her]" (p. 22).

This moment is especially indicative of the centrality of self-confidence, "a necessary precursor to ally development" and a quality that allows allies to "persevere during times of difficulty" (Munin & Speight, 2010, pp. 259–260). As DeTurk (2011) notes, "Self-described allies suggest . . . that a commitment to being an ally is experienced as an important element of identity" (p. 570). As such, when Hermione first returns to school with trepidation following her rape, Polly "cuts her off," reminding her that she is "devastatingly popular, which means everyone will be talking about [her]" (p. 79). Polly insists that Hermione return to maintain control of her social capital.

Polly's identity is tied to this moment in two manners; as two halves of the co-head cheerleader duo, Hermione and Polly share an identity as a unit of co-captains, and so Polly's identity, and therefore reputation, is tied to Hermione's behavior. Second, Polly's identity as an ally here is being challenged in a sense; if she "fails" to empower Hermione and to support her "enough" to convince her to return to school, then her important ally identity is compromised. Though Hermione momentarily wavers on her decision to return to school, considering "I think I'd be a lot more noticeable if I'm sick at school" (p. 80), with Polly's encouragement, she returns. This supports the findings of Munin and Speight's (2010) study on factors that influence college students' development in becoming allies; they concluded that "crucial aspects" were specific qualities of personality, including "extroversion, leadership, and empathy . . . . [S]ince being an ally is a social endeavor, the participants' extroverted natures enabled them to translate constant interactions with others into a renewable source of personal energy" (p. 259).

> **Allies risk reproducing oppressive dynamics, such as leaving privilege unchecked, if they are not mindful.**

Allies and Access: A Close Reading of the Abortion Scene

Perhaps the most telling illustration of how allyship is not neutral work is Hermione's abortion experience, since the rape resulted in pregnancy. To begin with, the ease with which Hermione accesses an abortion is clear; she knows that she has the option to choose which clinic will best suit her needs: "There were other clinics, closer clinics, but I picked the one with the best reputation. Also, I picked the one that was closest to the lab where they will be testing the DNA" (p. 133). She researches clinics as far as two hours away, knowing that an ally will drive her wherever she chooses.

Further, the police officer who worked on Hermione's case continues to act as both an exemplary ally and investigator by personally delivering the DNA sample, driving hours to ensure that the materials are properly handled. Certainly, police in rape cases do not usually demonstrate this attention to detail and extraordinary measures. Indeed, much research has uncovered how police commonly engage in "hurtful," "disbelieving, victim-blaming reactions to adult rape victims" (Greeson, Campbell, & Fehler-Cabral, 2016, p. 91). Greeson, Campbell, and Fehler-Cabral's study on adolescents' experiences with police after reporting sexual assault was "mixed" (p. 105): "A common description was that the police made the adolescents

feel like they, the victim, had done something wrong" (p. 96). Thus, Officer Plummer's attentive allyship is certainly unique.

Hermione is also armed with the choice to select which of her many allies will accompany her. Though her mother wants to accompany her, and despite how Hermione can see that "it kills her" (p. 132) to stay behind, perhaps unsurprisingly, Hermione requests Polly's presence. Regardless, everyone around Hermione supports her decision to abort; no one intervenes to discourage or shame her choice. This is even surprisingly apparent when Hermione discusses it with her reverend, another ally, who "doesn't flinch or hesitate on the word ['abortion']" when he asks, "You're going out of town for the abortion?" with a face "empty of both judgment and pity" (p. 129). Most notably, when she arrives at the clinic, no protesters are present and the staff is professional. Because of this, her primary ally, Polly, is able to support her in a safe, welcoming space called The Women's Health Clinic that she notes is full of many "plants and lots of natural light" (p. 134).

> Perhaps the most telling illustration of how allyship is not neutral work is Hermione's abortion experience, since the rape resulted in pregnancy.

However, it is in the scene leading up to and then following her abortion that interestingly reveals how allyship is fraught with tensions. For instance, Hermione notes that a "very pretty" Indian girl dressed in a "perfect sari" (p. 135) is waiting, sandwiched between her parents. They are described as "very stiff in their seats" (p. 135), perhaps suggesting that cultural norms are differently impacting this girl's abortion experience. Abortion has been legal in India since 1971; however, "medical practitioners . . . perform abortions under strict conditions," and there is an "arbitrary 20 week cut off" that can "compel women to make ill-informed decisions" (Datar, 2015, p. 1). Because this story takes place in Canada, it cannot be assumed that these Indian parents are disapproving or unsupportive; indeed, they are at the clinic with their daughter, which can be interpreted as allyship. Further, if they are upset, it might simply be because their daughter

is about to have an intense experience. However, Hermione senses that this is not the case; she is so uncomfortable that she looks away to "focus on the clipboard" (p. 135).

Parental allies are crucial to an individual's ability to act as an ally. As Munin and Speight (2010) note, "Parents . . . heavily impact[] ally development" (p. 261) and can be an important part of a supportive community (p. 262). Further, Tasker, Peter, and Horn (2014) argue that "parental attitudes constitute a critical pathway through which young people may be able to effect change" (p. 299). Parental support is also an example of "familial capital" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80), and certainly Hermione's parents provide such capital as they are consistently supportive and loving. For instance, her father is cautious about touching Hermione immediately following her assault: "He's afraid that if he touches me, I'll forget that he's my dad, not my rapist" (p. 82), signaling her father's keen awareness of potential triggering or further traumatization.

Relatedly, Hermione notes that all of the adults in her life are sensitive to the risk of further traumatization; in fact, she reveals that in all the time between her attack and meeting her family doctor, she "do[esn't]t think [she's] been alone with a male person since . . . [being] raped. Everyone is so considerate" (pp. 108–109). Thus, it is arguably reasonable to infer that Hermione's parents would be supportive of Hermione getting an abortion regardless of the reason, while the Indian girl's parents might be read as tense and disapproving. As such, Hermione's specific type of social capital, her familial capital, empowers her with a strong sense of community (Yosso, 2005, p. 79), which greatly contributes to both her healing process as well as her ability to turn around and act as an ally herself for others, namely Polly.

The scene immediately following Hermione's abortion is especially indicative of how allyship is certainly not neutral. Hermione sits in recovery with a "skinny woman," "the Indian girl," "a woman covered in tattoos," and "then a woman who hasn't smiled in a decade. Then a woman. Then a woman. And we all sit there and stare at the floor" (p. 138). The detail of all their downcast eyes "star[ing] at the floor" certainly suggests a number of responses—shame, fatigue, contemplation, and so forth. Marshall (2010) argues that "eyes open and downcast" are "veiled" (p. 354), suggesting that they are perhaps engaging in acts of

self-protection. Ultimately, each woman seems to be taking a moment to uniquely process her abortion. Without warning, the "woman with tattoos" breaks the silence to comment that soon she is "going to have the coldest beer you can possibly imagine" (p. 138); at that point, each woman takes a turn to reveal what creature comfort she plans to indulge in. However, the Indian girl breaks the mood; instead of planning for "beer," "ice cream," or "Bailey's," she offers, "I asked to see it . . . it didn't look like a person . . . I did the right thing" (p. 138). Immediately, the women offer words of support such as "Yes honey . . . you did the right thing" (p. 138). In contrast, Hermione remains silent.

Though Hermione silently reflects that she is "surrounded by people who are united" and that she has "never felt anything like this," "such a kinship," and that she "loves every person in this room" (p. 138), her silence speaks volumes. Although the women behave in a united fashion, it does not represent equity of experiences. Hermione knows she will return to her community, family, and friends supported; however, it is suggested that the others, especially the Indian girl, might not. Hermione's silence is telling because it suggests that Hermione does not need to participate in this exchange of affirmation and support; she doesn't need any more female friends. Validation in this space is not necessary for Hermione, who has access to an entire army of allies who can do this work for her, both in private and in public realms. Indeed, she may already be rich in "aspirational capital"—"the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Yet, for the others, this semi-private space might be the only one where they find this kind of "kinship" and "love" (p. 138); this might be their only space for "coalition building" (Holmes & Hunt, 2015, p. 157). Further, Hermione's choice to remain silent instead of being self-reflective and reciprocal here is curious, as she has demonstrated these qualities previously within her own community. Unfortunately, this marks a missed opportunity for a "cross-cultural [connection]," to participate in a "friendship . . . requir[ing] trust and communication across differences, challenging . . . and creating solidarity" (p. 161). As such, Hermione fails to be "account[able]" (p. 162), especially as a member of the dominant group.

Conclusion

It is critical to remember that Hermione and Polly's abilities to author themselves as friends standing in solidarity are largely influenced by and depend on their subject positions as privileged individuals who have significant access to building incredible social capital (Bourdieu, 2013; Yosso, 2005). As such, their abilities to function as allies are powered by their privilege, demonstrating that ally work is far from neutral. However, despite this, *Exit* consistently demonstrates that "friendships can provide opportunities for enacting allyship" (Holmes & Hunt, 2015, p. 161).

Hermione and Polly chiefly engage in ally work that is personal, self-reflective, and reciprocal, signaling that their strong female friendship is a site for empowerment and resistance against rape culture, a system that "condones and contributes to the ongoing sexual victimization of women and girls, while minimizing the responsibility of rapists" (Greeson, Campbell, & Fehler-Cabral, 2016, p. 91). As Gruber (2016) argues, "rape culture" is a term so "expansive[] and slippery"—pointing to everything from "brutal sexual assaults to jokes about sex"—that it is nearly "unhelpful. . . . [W]e are all part of it, it is terrible, and we need to do something—anything—to eradicate it" (p. 1028). Indeed, "almost everyone has been touched by rape culture" (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 2005, p. xi). Consider North America alone; in Canada, the pervasiveness of rape is "astounding" (Lauridsen & Everall, 2013, p. 109), and in America, president Donald Trump engaged in sexual violence described in "a viral video of [his] patriarchal, sexist, and misogynistic commentary," and he further continues to "relentlessly decry survivors" (Griffin, 2017, p. 141). As such, studying friend/ally/ships such as Hermione and Polly's in the critical literacy classroom might open up possibilities for modeling ally behavior as a strategy for combating rape culture.

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As DeTurk (2011) argues, such behavior includes providing concrete support as well as comforting and validating comments, being visible as an ally, using authority appropriately, initiating dialogue, questioning gently, responding in the moment, and/or waiting for appropriate moments to provide support. All these items displayed by Hermione and Polly for one another function to challenge sexual victimization in rape culture and hold potential for creating access points for discussions about rape culture in school. Unfortunately, such a friendship is rarely depicted in YAL; as a result, close bonds in *Exit, pursued by a bear* provide a unique and necessary example of how YAL female characters can be portrayed as significant and transformative influences for one another.

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Pamela K. **Coke**

Selling the Performance:

Unpacking the Relationship between Media Representations, Eating Disorders, and *Wintergirls*

I t is fall semester in my adolescent literature course. Students come to class having read Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls* (2009), a fictional yet realistic account of two friends, Cassie and Lia, both struggling with eating disorders. Cassie succumbs to the illness, and Lia is in danger of following close behind. Anderson tells the story through Lia's perspective, shedding light on her inner struggles with body image and personal relationships, among other factors. During in-class discussion, it is evident that students are having strong reactions to this book:

"I don't think I would ever teach this book."

"*Wintergirls* reads like a how-to manual for how to have an eating disorder."

"*Wintergirls* made me miss my eating disorder."

As a literature instructor and teacher educator, I cannot get these comments out of my head. At first, I think I am struggling with my choice of text. Perhaps it was not the right selection for this particular group of students. However, I believe I cannot teach a course that addresses contemporary adolescent literature without including Laurie Halse Anderson. In addition to my own admiration of Anderson and her work, students need to know she is an award-winning tour de force in the field. When I asked previous students what topics they believed an adolescent literature course needs to address, eating disorders were at the top of the list. I know I am justified in choosing *Wintergirls* as a whole-class read, but I cannot dismiss my students' comments. I am struggling with how to respond, especially to the student who bravely—and

hauntingly—shared, "*Wintergirls* made me miss my eating disorder."

Upon further reflection, I know I am not struggling with my choice of text. I am struggling with the role of eating disorders, and disordered eating, in American society. So was Anderson. She wrote *Wintergirls* in response to reader requests. As she notes on her website (Anderson, 2016), doctors encouraged Anderson to write this book to help "educate people and bring much-needed discussion to the topic." That fall semester, we were definitely discussing the topic of eating disorders, and as so often happens in teaching, my students educated me. They talked about counting calories, like Lia does in *Wintergirls*. They shared stories of visiting the hidden blogs Lia references in *Wintergirls*. They recounted stories of feeling targeted by the media. As a teacher researcher, I felt an obligation to delve further into the stories my students were sharing. I needed to give another layer of voice to what I was hearing. I kept coming back to one particular excerpt from *Wintergirls*: "because I don't need a muffin (410), I don't want an orange (75) or toast (87), and waffles (180) make me gag" (p. 5). All of the students in our adolescent literature course knew what the numbers in parentheses meant. Many (myself included) admitted that is how they, too, think about food. It is not about nutrition or enjoyment; it is about calories.

As a result of our in-class conversations, I designed a qualitative research study to help me learn more about the extent to which obsession over

calorie consumption and/or experience with an eating disorder were/was a part of adolescent life for study participants and to what extent this experience (or the lack thereof) helped position them for adulthood. Ultimately, I wanted to learn something about what is feeding our American cultural obsession with food. My central research question was: To what extent have media representations that participants have encountered in novels, magazines, films, etc. served as a contributing factor to their understanding of the role of eating disorders as a performance of adolescence? Eating disorders seem to have become a central part of American culture, so in this article, I offer a bounded examination of this phenomenon and how media representations play a role in how people experience and/or perform gender in adolescence.

Selling Eating Disorders to Adolescents: An Exchange of Values

Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (2012) define culture as "an invisible web of behaviors, patterns, rules, and rituals of a group of people who have contact with one another and share a common language" (p. 3). People who suffer from eating disorders engage in a tangled web of behaviors. They engage in repetitious acts of deprivation, indulgence, and/or purging. In a society "that continues to prize thinness even as Americans become heavier than ever before, almost everyone worries about their weight at least occasionally. The American Psychological Association notes people with eating disorders take such concerns to extremes, developing abnormal eating habits that threaten their well-being and even their lives" (2016). Eating disorders have become an intricate part of the web of American behavior patterns, especially for teenagers.

Media Representations and Adolescents as a Target Demographic
Media representations, including books, magazines, movies, etc., rely upon identifying and feeding behavior patterns. Such media representations are also an integral part of the cultural landscape for American teens, and adolescents are a primary target for advertisers (Calvert, 2008, p. 206). The United States is a capitalist society, and Americans have a large population base to which businesses can market goods and

services, but marketing is about more than selling goods and services; it is about transmitting cultural values. Evans (2008) describes, "At its core, marketing is about an exchange of value between the marketer and consumer. If the marketer can promote a product or service to make the consumer perceive sufficient value, the consumer is more likely to purchase it" (p. 182). Advertisers involved with print and-digital media know how to promote a product or service to a target demographic, and in many ways, they help to shape the ways a consumer will find value in that product or service. For example, teenagers find value in identifying with their friends. Advertisers market products in ways that maximize this idea of affiliation, of being like everyone else, while still maintaining individuality.

> **Media representations, including books, magazines, movies, etc., rely upon identifying and feeding behavior patterns. Such media representations are also an integral part of the cultural landscape for American teens[.]**

This is particularly significant when considering how much contact the average adolescent has with media representations in a given day. According to a Kaiser Family Foundation Study (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010), the average 8- to 18-year-old has over 10 hours of exposure to media every day, including TV (over four hours), computers (one and a half hours), print (38 minutes), and movies (25 minutes). Advertisers definitely use media as a way to reach potential consumers, including adolescents, through targeted ads (called psychographics) catered to an individual's demographics or lifestyle (AdAge, 2003). What adolescents encounter during those 10 hours of media exposure has an impact on their overall health and well-being. Kilbourne (1999) asserts, "Advertising supports more than 60 percent of magazine and newspaper production and almost 100 percent of the electronic media" (pp. 34–35). This means adolescents are potentially exposed to over 10 hours of advertising influence via Facebook and other media sources every day.

The results of three studies by Williams, Schimel,

Hayes, and Usta (2014) indicate that advertising has a greater impact on some individuals than on others. The researchers exposed participants to advertisements containing idealized body images. They found participants who had a higher extrinsic contingency focus (ECF), or those participants who tended to derive self-esteem from social as opposed to personal norms, tended to engage in behaviors, such as disordered eating, to attain the ideal body images in the media. Those participants who had a lower ECF, who located self-esteem in personal as opposed to social norms, tended to resist the ideal body images. This indicates that some adolescents are more prone to being affected by advertising and the media than other individuals.

> While adolescence is a time when young adults' bodies are experiencing myriad physical changes, we, as a culture, rarely openly discuss those changes.

Body Image, Gender Performance, and Eating Disorders

The work of Williams et al. resonates with Butler's work with performance theory. Butler (2007/1990) asserts that the action of gender requires a performance that is "a stylized repetition of acts" based on a conception of gender as "a constituted social temporality" and that has "the appearance of substance," a constructed identity (pp. 191–192). Adolescents are in the process of crafting their identity, which involves honing a stylized repetition of acts, certainly involving body image. Eating disorders are frequently part of an attempt to achieve an idealized body image, part of a social temporality, as Williams et al. concluded. The participants in the studies conducted by Williams et al. found the appearance of substance either within the social norms of advertisements or in the personal norms within themselves. Calvert (2008), Williams et al. (2014), and Butler (2007/1990) contribute to an understanding of how seeking or resisting a marketed ideal body image can be a significant part of how individuals perform gender in adolescence.

Body Image and Eating Disorders in Young Adult Literature

Not enough scholarly work has been conducted about body image and young adult literature. This may be, in part, because, as a culture, America still holds many subjects as taboo—too sensitive to be addressed at all, especially in public schools. While adolescence is a time when young adults' bodies are experiencing myriad physical changes, we, as a culture, rarely openly discuss those changes. Younger (2003) argues that we, as a society, particularly try to avoid discussing female bodies. She points out, "Because Young Adult fiction reflects social anxiety about female bodies, texts that are popular among young adults are often censored or challenged by librarians, teachers, and parents" (p. 45). The point here is that companies are publishing texts about female bodies, and young adults are reading those books. However, instead of engaging in conversation with young adults about the issues these books raise, the trusted adults in their lives are removing the books from circulation altogether, implying that if we, as a culture, remove references to female bodies from the shelves, we do not have to address our cultural anxiety about female bodies. Out of sight, out of mind.

Every year, the American Library Association publishes a list of the Top Ten Challenged Books, the books Younger references as being censored or challenged. Of those on the 2016 list (American Library Association, 2017), nine were challenged due to being sexually explicit. This supports the view that as a culture, our web of behaviors includes an unwillingness to examine adolescent sexuality and body image. Yet, young adults are exposed to explicit media representations of body images—from magazine covers to feature films to best-selling novels—on a daily basis. As a result, young adults, particularly adolescent females, get the message that their bodies are there to be judged and measured against societal standards. A blog entry (Blog, 2018) on the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) website points out, "Throughout history, women's bodies have been routinely criticized, commodified, and objectified." The blogger explains, "According to renowned trauma expert Timothy Brewerton, women who report sexual trauma exhibit higher rates of both PTSD and eating disorders." As a society, rape, sexual harassment, and

eating disorders are topics we tend to avoid, both in and out of the classroom. It is not that young people have not experienced these life-changing events; it is that we do not talk about them.

Anyone who has suffered from a traumatic experience, such as an eating disorder, is prone to triggers. Medical expert Jennifer Rollin (2016) defines a trigger as "something that sets off cravings in recovering individuals." A craving here is synonymous with a behavior. Being exposed to a trigger can cause an individual to revert to a particular behavior. For example, a media representation, such as a character or an event in a young adult novel, can trigger a desire in a reader who is recovering from an eating disorder to behave in a particular way. If we do not talk about rape, sexual harassment, or eating disorders, we cannot understand potential triggers. Young adult authors like Laurie Halse Anderson explain why this is problematic. During a *New York Times* (Tanenhaus, 2009) book review podcast, Anderson shared:

> When we submitted [*Wintergirls*] to the experts for the final reviews, that was the first question. Are there things in this book that will trigger unsuspecting people? And if so, what do we do about that? . . . Their response was . . . that we have a culture that glamorizes this. The docs say, yes, the book is going to trigger people. Turning on the television triggers people—looking at billboards, going to the computer, walking past a magazine rack. But the challenge in the book they felt I had met was to show the entire story. There is nothing glamorous or lovely about an eating disorder. It's horror.

The next question is, "What do we do about it?" One solution is exposing young adults to media representations that address taboo subjects and triggers head on, and then engaging with students in critical dialogue about the messages they are encountering. Emma Giordano (2017), a communications intern for the NEDA, wrote on the organization's blog, "Fiction, known to offer many an escape from reality, has also developed into a way for individuals to see themselves in literature. We are so lucky the literary world has moved beyond just entertainment to a place of identification and comfort for so many with unique experiences." She is optimistic that because more authors, like Anderson, are publishing brave works about body image and eating disorders, we, as a culture, might be able to engage in the kinds of conversations that could move us forward.

Even though much has been written independently about media representations, body image, eating disorders, and adolescent literature, there is a gap in the research related to how these cultural factors intersect and influence one another, if at all. I was unable to find other relevant research that addresses how exposure to media representations, including adolescent literature, have influenced whether or not an adolescent develops an eating disorder. I designed this study to help fill this void.

Methodology and Data Analysis

My research stemmed from in-class discussions with students in an upper-division adolescent literature course at a Western university. I requested and was able to interview 10 university graduate and undergraduate students who had read young adult literature and popular magazines (such as *Seventeen*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Teen Vogue*) in my efforts to understand the extent to which these texts have informed their understanding of and their experience with calorie consumption and/or eating disorders.

Due to the sensitive nature of the data, I wanted to transcribe all of the interviews myself, so I needed to keep the number manageable, thus allowing me to give my full attention to the participants and their responses. I sent a recruitment email to 60 former adolescent literature students. Nine of the students who ultimately agreed to participate (8 female, 1 male) had previously taken my adolescent literature course. The tenth student volunteered following a conversation I had with her about her graduate thesis. Because I had requested and received 10 participants, I did not need to turn anyone away. After participants signed an IRB-approved consent form, I scheduled a one-hour, semi-structured interview with each individual participant.

> **One solution is exposing young adults to media representations that address taboo subjects and triggers head on, and then engaging with students in critical dialogue about the messages they are encountering.**

My data sources consisted solely of these interview transcripts.

For the purposes of this article, I am focusing on two participants, using their self-selected pseudonyms. I interviewed both students early in the data collection process, beginning with background questions that focused on what they read as adolesecents and what drew them to participate in this research study, then moving toward the extent to which they believe eating disorders are a part of adolescence in general and for them, personally. I developed interview questions to help me uncover the origins of participants' thinking about media representations (what they watched, what they read) and body image (how what they watched and read affected their sense of self).

Amelia Maria was a third-year undergraduate college student majoring in English Education. She planned to teach middle school. She was a student in my adolescent literature course, and she was one of the students who was adamant that Anderson's *Wintergirls* reads like a how-to manual for how to have an eating disorder. I am including her voice here because she was representative of a range of voices I heard during in-class discussions. While she believes some readers may have body image issues before reading a text like *Wintergirls*, she definitely believes such a text can put ideas into adolescents' heads. Amelia self-identified as having suffered from binge eating disorder (BED), though she did not discuss having had a clinical diagnosis. She confessed she would choose to be bulimic, but she does not have a gag reflex, which leaves her unable to purge after her binges.

Rachel Smith was a first-year graduate student preparing to be a middle school or high school English teacher. She, too, was a student in my adolescent literature course. Rachel was clinically diagnosed with both anorexia nervosa (AN) and bulimia nervosa (BN). She was hospitalized for her eating disorder, and she continues to undergo therapy. At the time of our interview, she considered herself in recovery. She memorably said that reading *Wintergirls* made her "miss" her eating disorder. Since this is one of the comments that initially sparked this study, she is included as a focal participant here.

In terms of data analysis, I used thematic coding, outlining basic descriptive categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 179), including social influences (family, friends) and media influences (books, films). Through the interview questions, I invited participants to articulate their working definition of adolescence. I asked them to describe their personal experience with eating disorders, and I challenged them to think about who, if anyone, should be reading texts about eating disorders, like *Wintergirls*. This allowed me to reflect on the data and to code for themes such as adolescence, media, and performance. By conducting content analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 179), I was able to examine the frequency of statements related to performing gender in adolescence (the extent to which eating disorders were/were not a part of adolescence for participants) and the impact of media representations (books/films/magazines/websites) that have influenced each participant's own performance of gender in adolescence. The more interviews I conducted and the more data I coded, the more fascinated I became with the idea that eating disorders have become a way for young people to perform adolescence. Repeatedly, I heard participants describe the ways in which American media—including books, films, television, and magazines—market a very specific way of performing gender in adolescence. I started to question just how embedded eating disorders are in American culture.

Amelia and Rachel both believe that media representations such as books, magazines, and films are selling eating disorders to today's adolescents. They both described how these representations taught them specific ways to perform their gender as adolescent females.

> **Through the interview questions, I invited participants to articulate their working definition of adolescence. I asked them to describe their personal experience with eating disorders, and I challenged them to think about who, if anyone, should be reading texts about eating disorders, like *Wintergirls*.**

Amelia Maria: "*Wintergirls* is a guide on how to have an eating disorder."

Amelia described four specific forms of media representation that have contributed to what she, as a female member of the cultural landscape, is buying: fitness apps, including LoseIt and MyFitnessPal; blogs, such as Tumblr and FiTblr; adolescent literature, specifically *Wintergirls,* Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2011), and Donna Cooner's *Skinny* (2012); and her sorority.

From the time she was very young, Amelia's mom suffered from multiple sclerosis. She contracted an infection and refused treatment, which amounted to committing suicide in Amelia's eyes. She died in September of Amelia's eighth-grade year. Technology was already an integral part of Amelia's daily life, and by the end of that school year, Amelia had started counting calories. She discovered an app called LoseIt, but she wasn't clear on how she was supposed to use it. She explained, "What was supposed to happen is that [LoseIt] gave you a set number of calories, but it was somewhere like 900, so obviously lower on the spectrum. What you were supposed to do is you were supposed to eat your 1200, 1500 depending on how tall, gender, etc., science-y stuff, and then work out to get down to that number, but it wasn't very clear in expressing that." Fitness apps like LoseIt are an influential form of media representation. They teach adolescents ways to control their bodies and their caloric intake—and output—to achieve a particular body image.

For Amelia, the fitness apps were a precursor to blogs. Amelia was drawn to blogs originally because she liked the photography and the images that people would reblog. Tumblr played a significant role in her development, though she remarked, "I hate Tumblr, for many reasons, but one of the reasons is that it romanticizes self-harm, suicide, depression, and most of all, eating disorders." She described how she quickly noticed that images about the "thigh gap"— "when you put your feet together and your thighs don't touch"—were really popular; they were part of the "shrieking chorus" that Lia refers to in *Wintergirls* (p. 175). In the novel, Lia describes how she read posts by young women on secret blogs dedicated to supporting other young women with eating disorders, "hungry girls singing endless anthems while our

throats bleed and rust and fill up with loneliness" (p. 175). The "songs," or blog posts, included messages such as, "I need a text buddy for fasting tomorrow" and "Only ate a bowl of cereal today which is good" (p. 175). Amelia was very familiar with these secret blogs.

Later, in college, Tumblr led Amelia to FiTblr, or fitness blogs. I was not familiar with FiTblr, so Amelia elucidated: "So the whole guise of the blog was health, like Blogilates, that YouTube channel, is guised toward health, but it gets perceived into starving yourself." She expounded, "And it gets interpreted differently as a 15-, 16-, 17-year-old with self-esteem *this* small." While these blogs were supposed to be positive and inspirational, providing food and exercise tips, for Amelia, like Lia, they were like going down the rabbit hole; these blogs made her conscious that she did not look like the women featured on the screen.

> [Amelia] described how she quickly noticed that images about the "thigh gap"—"when you put your feet together and your thighs don't touch"—were really popular; they were part of the "shrieking chorus" that Lia refers to in *Wintergirls* (p. 175).

Around this same time, at the age of 15, Amelia read *Wintergirls* and *Thirteen Reasons Why* for the first time. A friend had recommended *Wintergirls* to her; she read and liked it. She confessed that she is drawn to stories of teenage drama, or "angst-y stuff," as it serves as her own personal way of dealing with her own "tragic life backstory." As a reader and as an adolescent, *Wintergirls* scared her because "a lot of [Lia's] habits were similar to mine. Not that I started emulating Lia, but that my habits were similar." In the novel, Lia discusses her lack of control, describing how, if she starts eating, she fears she won't be able to stop. "One bite, ten bites, the whole tray would pour down my throat" (p. 184). Amelia had this same struggle with binge eating. A lot of people she knew who read this book started to develop disordered eating habits. In fact, this was the first time the words "eating disorder" became a part of

Amelia's vocabulary. It was the first time she realized "[t]hat this was a disease. That it was harmful. That it was going to kill me if I continued, and something needed to happen. I don't know what. I don't know what that something was because obviously I didn't get help." In *Wintergirls*, Lia's best friend, Cassie, does, indeed, die from her eating disorder. This was a lightbulb moment for Amelia; Cassie helped her understand that people can—and do—die from this disease. The book served as a media representation that taught Amelia about the possible consequences of her actions. It was a powerful realization.

> **Amelia was definitely aware that, as a teacher, she is selling certain aspects of culture to students by virtue of the texts and other media representations she chooses to include in and exclude from her classroom.**

Given the fact she had such a strong reaction to *Wintergirls*, I asked Amelia if she would ever teach this book. She considered how the book could be both helpful and detrimental, but ultimately, she responded, "This is a very graphic book. It *is* a guide on how to have an eating disorder. I feel like this book in particular puts ideas into people's heads that weren't there before." Take, for example, Lia's "rules" for having an eating disorder, from consuming no more than 800 calories per day, preferably 500, to starting the [eating] day at dinner (p. 103). As a teacher, this is something she needs to weigh carefully.

Amelia was definitely aware that, as a teacher, she is selling certain aspects of culture to students by virtue of the texts and other media representations she chooses to include in and exclude from her classroom. Amelia understands that teaching a book is a political act. Students could construe teaching a book about eating disorders as condoning those behaviors. If Amelia recommends the text, she could be, in some students' views, recommending what the text presents to some readers; ergo, she is selling a how-to manual about eating disorders to students by virtue of recommending that students read the text. This made me stop and think about the number of students in our adolescent literature course who confessed to me that they (re)visited blogs about eating disorders and/or needed to seek out counseling after reading *Wintergirls* for class. It made me reflect on what I was selling to those students, and I could definitely understand Amelia's point of view.

This is exactly why *Skinny* is problematic for Amelia as well. She was bothered by the fact that the main character, Ever, gets gastric bypass surgery as a teenager. When a classmate—an adolescent—who the narrator describes as 20 pounds overweight, asks Ever about the surgery, considering it for herself, Amelia was outraged. She asked, "What does that do to an adolescent?" What bothered Amelia was that the author never addresses why Ever is overeating. She relates: "It's her mother's death. There's something going on there that needs to be addressed, and she's using food to cope. And Lia is using lack of food to cope, and nobody is addressing that. Nobody's helping them." That is what bothers Amelia the most about texts and other media representations: nobody addresses the root causes of eating disorders, and nobody helps those who are suffering.

This is a cultural pattern that Amelia continues to see in college—as a whole and in her sorority. She and her sorority sisters are trying to start a conversation about the causes of body image issues by participating in activities like Fat Talk Free Week, where they focus more on "this is how you keep yourself in good health," not "this is how you lose weight." For that one week, they refrain from fat shaming, skinny shaming, and negative talk. Instead, they seek to celebrate, "You are who you are, and that's great." That may be only one week out of the year, but Amelia feels its effects beyond that week. For her, the conversations about body image that she engages in with her sorority sisters, including those experienced during Fat Talk Free Week, have a positive impact on her sense of self. Amelia has this in her life because of the cultural influence of her sorority. What about other women who do not have such a sisterhood in their lives? What about women like Rachel?

Rachel Smith: "*Wintergirls* made me miss my eating disorder."

Rachel also outlined four specific forms of media representation that have had an impact on her: maga-

zines, specifically *Teen Vogue;* TV and film, especially the reality TV show *The Swan* and two films—one a documentary and the other *Black Swan* (Avnet and Aronofsky, 2011); blogs similar to those Lia discusses in *Wintergirls*; and adolescent literature, such as *Wintergirls*. In Rachel's view, her culture is decidedly selling her eating disorders, including anorexia (AN) and bulimia (BN), through these media representations.

Rachel was able to clearly articulate how magazines helped her to buy into the allure of an eating disorder. During our interview, she discussed how she consumed *Teen Vogue* like an instructional manual. This magazine was selling an image to Rachel, and she was definitely buying. In high school, she used *Teen Vogue* as her stylist; she used it to determine what to buy and how to dress. She liked the way the clothes looked on the slim models, and she longed to look like the models she saw on the pages of the magazine. She earned attention for how she looked when she followed this manual, and she liked this kind of attention.

Rachel was aware that in elementary school, students came to school with full sandwiches, but by high school, people brought a half of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and some carrots. She noticed that other people around her were eating considerably less than she was, so she felt she must be eating too much. It did not occur to her that perhaps the others were eating too little. She found herself negotiating, "What is the socially acceptable amount of food to be eating to fit in with this group of people?" Her eating habits at school changed dramatically, but at home, she continued to eat "normal, balanced meals."

By her junior year of high school, Rachel realized she was "very unhappy" and that she had "really bad body image issues." She took a class in high school dedicated to body image. The objective of the class was to learn how to select and wear clothes that were the best for your body type. The teacher graded students for putting on an outfit, standing in front of the class, and subjecting themselves to critique. The teacher's idea was that students needed to know how to dress appropriately for the job market. For someone like Rachel, who had had body image issues since age nine, this class compounded existing problems. At the end of the course, the teacher showed a documentary film on eating disorders. This was a turning point for Rachel. She remembers watching the film and think-

ing, "Oh, God, there's an answer to what I'm feeling. There is a solution to this problem." On one hand, she knew that she was supposed to watch the documentary and think, "Eating disorders are bad," but on the other hand, she thought it seemed "like a really smart solution to the problem I was having."

This was when her eating became less regular. She started feeling worse about her body. Like Lia in *Wintergirls,* she started using laxatives (p. 184). She didn't have a clinically diagnosed eating disorder until her freshman year of college, but this documentary definitely planted some fertile seeds. For a young woman who already had a disposition toward eating disorders, viewing a documentary film on eating disorders in high school helped her understand how she could look like the models in *Teen Vogue*, a form of media representation that told Rachel how to perform adolescence.

This documentary was not the only film that proved significant for Rachel. She remembers the film *Black Swan* as being pivotal for her as well. Rachel reflected, "I remember after I saw it, I just Googled pictures of [Natalie Portman] and I would just stare at her and I would feel so bad about myself and I wanted to look like her." This led Rachel to make a fascinating connection.

RS: I was so drawn to that movie, and I thought she was so skinny, and so fascinating, and weird and dark, and I just related to that, and I wanted to *be* that character. I wanted to be miserable and skinny and interesting.

PC: And you equate those three [miserable, skinny, interesting]?

RS: Absolutely.

PC: What drew you to the combination of those three. Do you remember?

RS: Hmm . . . I don't know where the miserable really comes from, but I've always wanted to be skinny, and I've always equated skinny with interesting because I got a lot of attention when I was very young for being small, and it became, um, what every adult commented on, and it became so ingrained in my identity, so I've always equated

being small with being interesting. And it's not something I have wanted to lose, still to this day, because it's so ingrained in who I am.

Rachel equated being miserable, skinny, and interesting. She told me about how reality TV shows, such as Fox's *The Swan* (Hanson, 2004), reiterated the cultural value of being small, of conforming to a cultural standard of beauty. In the show, contestants would agree to undergo a makeover, transforming from an ugly duckling into a beautiful swan. Rachel and her sister watched this show without any adult supervision, and it, too, contributed to her identity. Feminist scholar Douglas (2010) critiqued the show, commenting how "it made all too explicit the narrow physical standards to which women are expected to conform, the sad degree to which women internalize these standards, the lengths needed to get there, and the impossibility for most of us to meet the bar" (p. 223). Indeed, *The Swan* helped Rachel to internalize these physical standards, and she took pride in the lengths it took her to achieve this standard.

> **[Rachel] confessed she was only able to read the first 30 pages [of *Wintergirls*], and while she is personally against censorship, she struggled with whether or not this book should be censored in some way.**

For Rachel, texts like *Teen Vogue,* movies like *Black* Swan, and reality TV shows like *The Swan* are selling this enticing combination of being skinny, interesting, and miserable. Digital media is selling this combination as well. As Rachel was practicing her eating disorder—learning how to eat less and less food—she discovered blogs dedicated to eating disorders, similar to the blogs Lia visits in *Wintergirls*. Looking back now, she can see how those blogs are "horrible" and "disgusting," how they serve as places where people "are reinforcing each other's bad decisions and picking up tricks for continuing to engage in that disordered eating." She described how the human body does not want to have an eating disorder; it fights the ritualistic behaviors. The blogs help you "cheat the system," sharing ways you can "cheat the very strong messages that your body is sending you." Rachel learned a great deal from those blogs, and that is why she had such a strong reaction to reading *Wintergirls*.

Rachel read the book for the first time as a graduate student in our adolescent literature course. She confessed she was only able to read the first 30 pages, and while she is personally against censorship, she struggled with whether or not this book should be censored in some way. She shared that if she had read *Wintergirls* in high school, it would have helped piece together some things for her. While the documentary film gave her some seeds about how to have an eating disorder, *Wintergirls* would have filled in a lot of the blanks; it would have told her how to get where she wanted to go—and this made her angry. She felt vehemently that Anderson was "giving away" a lot of secrets that she, personally, had worked so hard to attain. For example, Anderson describes how Lia sewed quarters into the pockets of her robe on days when she had to weigh in in front of her stepmother, Jennifer, to prove that she was "above trouble." When Lia steps on the scale, she notes that she is "107.00 fake pounds" (p. 47). She is cheating the system, thereby protecting her eating disorder. Rachel conveyed, "I just remember thinking, 'Who is this woman to give away those secrets?' You know, I earned that based on my special club, and I worked really hard to get this, and this book is giving away all of those secrets." She found this "shortcut" approach to eating disorders unfair and wrong.

Cause and Effect: Media Representations and Eating Disorders

It is difficult to argue against Amelia's and Rachel's experiences that American media representations are selling eating disorders. On her website (2016), Anderson describes how she struggled with writing this book and the way it speaks to a particular performance of gender. She acknowledges that disordered eating was a part of her experience of adolescence as well. She felt compelled to write *Wintergirls* because of her personal experience, because of letters from readers, and because of a request from a friend who was a doctor. In other words, the wider public was saying that eating disorders are issues that need to be addressed. Anderson did her research, including visit-

ing the blogs that Lia, Amelia, and Rachel all discuss.

Do people have eating disorders because of *Wintergirls*? Amelia and Rachel would say yes. Does that mean that Anderson is selling eating disorders? That was certainly not her stated intention. Anderson cautions, "When you buy into the message that your self-worth should be measured on a scale, then you give up your power. You hand it over to people who will prey on your insecurities. Advertisers work very hard to make you feel bad, so you will buy whatever it is they are selling" (Anderson, 2016). Females like Amelia, who kept track of every calorie she consumed on an app on her phone, and like Rachel, who weighed herself five times per day, definitely gave up their power. Books, movies, blogs, and magazines—a whole range of media representations—preyed on their insecurities. On one level, they thought their eating disorders gave them control, but ultimately these young women surrendered power over their own bodies. They let apps and scales and a whole range of rituals and behaviors control them instead.

Anderson hoped that writing *Wintergirls* would "lead to discussions of why we give our power about body images over to the people who are hired to make us hate ourselves" (2016). Amelia read the book twice, and she sees the power of discussing this text with individuals. Rachel could not even finish reading the text once. Neither Amelia nor Rachel would ever teach this text, as they believe the book is dangerous. If a teacher puts this book in the hands of an adolescent reader, the teacher needs to be prepared to support the student throughout the reading experience. Giving a reader a book about a sensitive topic without such support could have disastrous consequences. As Rachel pointed out, if she had read *Wintergirls* in high school, particularly on her own, without the guidance of a teacher, she believes she would have "connected the dots" earlier and developed her eating disorder earlier.

By the same token, a teacher needs to be professionally and personally prepared to support the reader. Interestingly, both Amelia and Rachel expressed feeling unprepared as teachers for the kind of discussion it would take to counter body image issues. While neither participant advocates censorship, both believe a book addressing sensitive cultural issues, like *Wintergirls*, requires more scaffolding and support than they feel qualified to give. In addition, Amelia

and Rachel struggled with articulating who should read this book—and under what circumstances. We cannot deny eating disorders are a part of the larger picture of how American culture (dys)functions. What we can do is acknowledge that reading books like *Wintergirls* can be a part of our culture's way of being, knowing, and understanding.

Eating Disorders as a Performance of Gender in Adolescence

Currently, eating disorders affect predominantly, though certainly not exclusively, girls and women (American Psychological Association, 2016). For Amelia and Rachel, eating disorders were a way for them to perform their identity as adolescent females. Butler (2007/1990) asserts that the action of gender requires a performance that is "a stylized repetition of acts," one that requires a conception of gender as "a constituted social temporality" and that has "the appearance of substance," a constructed identity (pp. 191–192). Both Amelia and Rachel engaged in this performance.

> **Interestingly, both Amelia and Rachel expressed feeling unprepared as teachers for the kind of discussion it would take to counter body image issues.**

In *Wintergirls*, Anderson describes how Cassie learned to perform her female adolescent identity, ironically at drama camp, where every girl in Cassie's cabin forced herself to throw up. Cassie learned her bulimia at drama camp. Lia describes how Cassie had "turned pro" at bulimia by the time she was in eighth grade, "color-coding the beginning of her binges either Doritos orange or blueberry purple so she'd know when the job was done. Her favorite puking finger was lined with scratches that never healed" (p. 147). For Cassie, and for Rachel, bulimia was a stylized repetition of acts—not just a one-time performance, but a way to repeatedly perform her female adolescent identity. For both Cassie and Rachel, bulimia was an integral part of stylizing the body and maintaining gender. Rachel noted how this repetition of acts brought her closer to her ideal, the image of the young

women in *Teen Vogue* and *Black Swan*, media representations that helped her learn what a female can and should look like.

Butler (2007/1990) notes that this performance requires a conception of gender as situated in social temporality, which is to say gender is a verb, not a noun, and that it can change. Lia is not automatically a "wintergirl"; she becomes one over time. After Cassie's death, Lia's eating disorder continues to progress, making her weaker and weaker, physically, mentally, and emotionally. As Lia reaches 93.5 pounds, she notes she barely weighs enough to push down on the accelerator in her car. She is paranoid, and she is having hallucinations from lack of nourishment. She envisions Cassie in the aisles of a pharmacy as she is looking for laxatives and diuretics. Cassie tells Lia, "You're not dead, but you're not alive, either. You're a wintergirl, Lia-Lia, caught in between the worlds. You're a ghost with a beating heart" (pp. 195–196).

> **If I do not include difficult texts like *Wintergirls* in my classroom, I am avoiding a valuable learning experience, an opportunity to engage students with challenging, important conversations about issues that affect their health and well-being.**

Lia is in the process of changing, moving from adolescent female to adolescent wintergirl, and soon, to deceased female. Amelia and Rachel experienced similar performances of gender—Amelia through her binge eating and Rachel through her anorexia and bulimia. Their gendered identities changed over time as they performed the acts involved with disordered eating. For Amelia, fitness apps, blogs, and books served as significant media representations, teaching her how to perform her identity as a female. For Rachel, magazines, films, and books helped guide her toward her changing performance of gender, moving her from a healthy girl to a battling woman.

For Butler, the performance of gender involves the appearance of substance as a constructed identity. For Lia in *Wintergirls,* this culminates in being labeled medically stable after an all-too-brief stay in the hospital while awaiting a bed at a treatment facility. Yet Anderson lets the reader see how Lia constructs her identity: "I failed eating, failed drinking, failed not cutting myself into shreds. Failed friendship. Failed sisterhood and daughterhood. Failed mirrors and scales and phone calls. Good thing I'm stable" (p. 227). For Lia, her identity is so wrapped up in her eating disorder, she is not sure who she is without it. To those around her, her doctors and her family, her identity has the appearance of substance, the appearance of stability. For Lia, who has so carefully constructed her identity through her eating disorder, she is less convinced. She observes, "I don't know what I'm supposed to look like anymore" (p. 228). She has relied so heavily on media representations to tell her who and what to look like that, once she can no longer construct that identity, she is not sure who she is.

This is why Amelia's and Rachel's words haunt me as a teacher. When Amelia said that *Wintergirls* is basically a how-to manual for how to have an eating disorder, I had to ask myself, "Is this a media representation I want influencing adolescent readers in my classroom?" I realize that, as a teacher, I do not get to choose which media representations will have the most influence on students. If it is not *Wintergirls*, it will be blogs or films or magazines. We cannot protect our adolescents from all of the media influences that could potentially sell them an eating disorder. However, while that is true, as a teacher educator, I am keenly aware of the state standards as well. I know that by the end of twelfth grade, we need students to be able to read and comprehend texts independently. Students need practice and guidance as they learn how to make sense of texts for themselves. If I do not include difficult texts like *Wintergirls* in my classroom, I am avoiding a valuable learning experience, an opportunity to engage students with challenging, important conversations about issues that affect their health and well-being.

By including *Wintergirls* on my reading list, I am giving students the opportunity to share their interpretation of a text as a how-to manual, and then taking that conversation to the next level. What do you, as a reader, do with this knowledge? If a text *can* function as a how-to manual, how do you make sense of that text? Are there other readings of that same text? We can use this as an opportunity to practice critical literacy skills, working together to unpack questions

such as: What does this text mean to me? How would *Wintergirls* be different if Lia had died from her illness? What is Anderson really trying to say? Instead of leaving a reader to grapple with these questions alone and unsupported, I can help students better understand how *Wintergirls* can function as a cautionary tale. We can learn to push back against the how-to model. And then there is Rachel, who said *Wintergirls* made her "miss" her eating disorder. Like Lia, her eating disorder had become an integral part of her identity. Her anorexia and her bulimia were how she performed adolescence. What other media representations can we offer to adolescent females that would provide a healthier how-to manual for how to not only perform but to be an adolescent female in the world?

Reading Is Not Enough

As I noticed in my adolescent literature course, reading was not enough. We, as teachers, cannot just place a book in a student's hands and think our job is done. Indeed, most of us understand that is where our job begins. We can use media representations—like books, films, and blogs—to begin a close reading of the role of gender in performing adolescence and to begin a critique of what these media representations are selling to adolescents that influence this performance.

We can begin by supplementing students' reading with counter-narratives through research articles, nonfiction works, and informational texts. The National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) offers a wealth of research-based support materials on its website (https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org), and the American Psychological Association (APA) offers a network of support resources as well (http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/eating.aspx). Marya Hornbacher's (2006/1997) gripping memoir, *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia,* provides a firsthand account of one woman's battle with eating disorders, while Daniel Becker's (2005) cautionary tale, *This Mean Disease: Growing Up in the Shadow of My Mother's Anorexia Nervosa,* offers insight into how eating disorders affect those around someone afflicted by the disease. Informational texts can help provide support for readers as well, including the APA publication *My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions and Eating* (Schechter, 2009), winner of the Moonbeam

Children's Book Award for Health Issues, and Costin and Grabb's (2011) *8 Keys to Recovery from an Eating Disorder: Effective Strategies from Therapeutic Practice and Personal Experience*, co-written by a therapist and her former patient.

We can build upon this important reading by engaging students in critical dialogue. Authors in professional journals have offered myriad ideas for critical dialogue over the years, from dialogue journals to Socratic seminars. My recent experiences have encouraged me to look at interdisciplinary approaches to critical

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dialogue. Higgins and Begoray (2012) offer a framework for critical media health literacy (CMHL), which they define as "a right of citizenship [that] empowers individuals and groups, in a risky consumer society, to critically interpret and use media as a means to engage in decision-making processes and dialogues; exert control over their health and everyday events; and make healthy changes for themselves and their communities" (p. 142). Their approach to critical dialogue integrates work from critical health literacy and critical media literacy. They advocate for a curriculum founded on the beliefs that

- education can result in social change;
- learners can act on problems of importance to themselves and the community;
- curriculum can facilitate an awareness of power dynamics;
- conscientization can take place among learners; and
- learners can challenge current social norms (p. 144).

In my adolescent literature course, I am considering revising the curriculum to include attention to critical health literacy, since so many issues in young adult literature are related to health, including eating disorders.

Taylor, Diamini, Khanyile, Mpanza, and Sathiparsad (2012) offer another option: role play. In their

article "Exploring the Use of Role Play in a School-Based Programme to Reduce Teenage Pregnancy," these authors describe how they use role play in a Life Skills course, a required component of the high school curriculum, as a way to examine gender norms, to understand cultural influences, and to change potentially destructive behaviors. They report, "Our experience of role play in a classroom situation suggests that it is effective in providing information, modelling behaviour, developing learners' inter-personal skills, and increasing their self-efficacy" (pp. 446–447). Imagine how we, as teachers, could use role play as a way to examine the pressures on young men and women to perform adolescence in a particular way.

> When I recommend that students read a book like *Wintergirls,* I have an obligation to pay attention to what I do with this media representation. I need to pay attention to the performance it encourages and perhaps requires of some readers. I need to be aware of what values I am exchanging with students.

Many teachers already engage in critical media studies with students in an effort to better understand cultural influences. I am thinking about ways I can bring this into my adolescent literature course, using media, including books like *Wintergirls*, to engage students in role play about ways to interrupt and change potentially destructive behaviors, including disordered eating. Taylor et al. (2012) advocate for the use of role play, explaining, "Social change programmes invariably face major obstacles. Although the role plays introduced learners to a variety of perspectives, they live in environments where patriarchy is dominant. Role plays can challenge these perspectives and offer learners a different viewpoint but, of course, intentions do not necessarily translate into behaviour, especially if the modelling behaviour is not reinforced" (p. 447). This encourages me to ask: What are the perspectives I want to challenge in my classroom? How can I best challenge them, especially if I hope to change behaviors?

Roofe, Brinegar, and Seymour (2015) offer an-other promising approach: service learning. They examine how interdisciplinary service-learning projects can benefit communities and students alike, focusing on a service-learning project about eating disorder prevention. In their work, they included students majoring in nutrition, art, and psychology at a public university. Participants took an Eating Attitudes Test and then took part in community events related to eating disorders. This work has me thinking about offering students in my adolescent literature course the opportunity to work with eating disorder specialists throughout the community, from nutritionists to physicians to counselors. Service learning offers the outward application piece—the opportunity for students to act in positive ways on the critical dialogue and role play we engage in within the classroom.

Closing Thoughts

This article is not intended to be a critique of Anderson or of *Wintergirls*. Instead, it is a shared call to arms to everyone who cares about young adults. As educators, we need to be aware of the messages the media is marketing to adolescents. We want to place important, relevant books, like *Wintergirls*, in the hands of readers. Since marketing is all about identifying and feeding behavior patterns, we need to be aware of what behavior patterns we are and are not identifying—and how we are feeding them. When I recommend that students read a book like *Wintergirls*, I have an obligation to pay attention to what I do with this media representation. I need to pay attention to the performance it encourages and perhaps requires of some readers. I need to be aware of what values I am exchanging with students.

Anderson concludes *Wintergirls* with Lia describing her recovery. "I am spinning the silk threads of my story, weaving the fabric of my world. The tiny elf dancer became a wooden doll whose strings were jerked by people not paying attention" (p. 277). I need to be someone who *is* paying attention. I set out to learn about the extent to which the media representations that participants have been exposed to (novels, magazines, etc.) served as a contributing factor to their understanding of the role of eating disorders as a performance of gender in adolescence. I learned that my literature choices—what I choose to include in and to exclude from my classroom—have a profound

effect on how students learn to perform gender in adolescence. Eating disorders are not going away any time soon. Therefore, I will continue to teach *Wintergirls*, but I will be even more aware of what I *do* with the text. As Anderson concludes, "There is no magic cure, no making it all go away forever. There are only small steps upward" (p. 278). Supporting materials, critical dialogue, role play, service learning, and young adult literature can help me exchange important values with students. They can help me help students take small steps upward—and that is something worth selling.

Pamela K. Coke is an associate professor of English Education at Colorado State University, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in adolescent literature, teaching methods, and research methods. She is grateful for the generous students who took part in class discussions about eating disorders, and she is especially grateful for the brave participants who agreed to take part in this research study. Before becoming a teacher educator, she taught seventh- and eighth-grade English language arts in Iowa. Introducing—and sitting next to—Laurie Halse Anderson at a Colorado Language Arts Society regional conference remains one of the highlights of her career.

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Kia Jane **Richmond**

An Examination of Mental Illness, Stigma, and Language in My *Friend Dahmer*

My Friend Dahmer (Backderf, 2012), a young adult graphic novel memoir about the life of Revere High School student Jeffrey Dahmer, is told from Derf Backderf's point of view as Dahmer's classmate in the mid-seventies in rural Ohio. Emotions and perspectives of young adults are at the center of the black-and-white text, which moves quickly from their sophomore year to just beyond their senior year. Though no story about a brutal serial killer should be optimistic, *My Friend Dahmer* offers readers the powerful perspective of insight. Backderf indicates throughout the work that if anyone had paid attention to Dahmer's rampant alcohol use, erratic behavior and emotions, or deteriorating home life, Dahmer might not have become a serial killer. However, the author also uses stigmatizing language to characterize Dahmer as a person with mental illness(es), perpetuating stereotypes of such persons as outsiders who are at least partially responsible for their own mistreatment by others.

Literature Review

I position mental illness as both a medical and social issue, relying on the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's (2013) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-5*), which offers a "classification of mental disorders with associated criteria designed to facilitate more reliable diagnoses" (Kupfer & Regier, 2012, p. xli). Additionally, in my analysis and interpretation of *My Friend Dahmer*, I include research from both young adult literature (YAL)

and the social sciences, considering how language signifies and contributes to perceptions of mental illness. As I have argued previously (Richmond, 2017), language used in young adult literature has an effect on our treatment of ourselves and others. Through my research for a forthcoming book, *Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature: Exploring Real Problems through Fictional Characters* (in press, 2018), I have found that many terms used to describe mental illness in YAL are authentic in that they note symptoms classified by the *DSM-5*. However, other language reflects negative labels and stereotypes about individuals with mental illness and contributes to the continued stigmatization of persons with mental disorders.

Psychology researchers report that Americans and Western Europeans share some commonly held misconceptions about and stigmatizing attitudes toward people with mental illness. Corrigan and Watson (2002) note that such misconceptions include the belief that individuals with mental illness are dangerous and should be feared and that they are exclusively responsible for their illnesses and/or are undependable (p. 17). Stereotypes of individuals with mental disorders contribute to stigmatizing behaviors. Rose, Thornicroft, Pinfold, and Kassam (2007) describe 250 different stigmatizing labels that adolescents employed toward individuals with mental illness, including derogatory terms such as "nuts," "psycho," "crazy," "weird," and "freak" (p. 97). The authors also point to the prevalence of pejorative language in news, film, and television.

Scholarship on mental illness in YAL has been on the rise over the past five years. Such research has focused on mental illness in YAL as a whole, as well as on specific issues of bullying, suicide, autism, and eating disorders. Freeman (2015) offers an analysis of J. K. Rowling's sympathetic rendering of characters with mental illness in the Harry Potter series (1997–2007) and suggests that the novels can be used as educational and therapeutic tools for young adults dealing with trauma. Thaller (2015) considers how characters in the classic young adult novel *Go Ask Alice* (Sparks, 1971/2006) and the contemporary text *Liar* (Larbalestier, 2009) are portrayed and points to the dangers of criminalizing and animalizing those with mental illness. Parsons (2016) uses critical discourse analysis to examine how fat, female protagonists in eight young adult novels are (re)presented. Her findings suggest that the protagonists are portrayed as "obsessed with and/or addicted to food," which perpetuates the stigma associated with fat females and contributes to the (single) mythic construct of an ideal female body (p. 11). Similarly, Rozema (2014) notes that novels related to young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder seem to lack diversity in how characters are portrayed. Scrofano (2015) focuses on stylistic trends (e.g., novels in verse or graphic novels) as well as thematic trends in recent texts featuring characters with mental illness. Her essay helps shine a light on some of the realistic problems associated with mental illness (e.g., financial concerns and difficulties with medication compliance) included in novels such as *A Blue So Dark* (Schindler, 2010) and *Get Well Soon* (Halpern, 2009). Wickham (2018) examines how mental illness is portrayed in Neal Shusterman's *Challenger Deep* (2015) and Susan Vaught's *Freaks like Us* (2012). She argues that the authors effectively portray the protagonists' symptoms of schizophrenia and suggests that such depictions help to challenge the stigma of mental illness.

My own research (Richmond, 2014, 2017) and that of Pytash (2013) discusses the benefits of using YAL with preservice teachers. I argue that using YAL featuring characters with mental illness can help reduce the stigma associated with psychological disorders. Moreover, by examining language, teachers can help youth interrogate social beliefs, the marginalization of individuals and social groups, and their own use of language and its (potential) connection to

perpetuating stereotypes. Similarly, Pytash describes teacher candidates' development of compassion and empathy for characters who are bullied or who consider suicide in *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Asher, 2011) and *Hate List* (Brown, 2009).

Taken together, this scholarship points to a growing interest in analyses of young adult texts that feature mental illness issues. Little research, however, has focused on *My Friend Dahmer*. Two recent scholarly articles that do include research on Backderf's book are by Harriet Earle. Her (2014) essay in *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* focuses on Backderf's use of Dahmer's eyes and glasses as tools to, among other things, dehumanize the character; it also positions the book as a *bildungsroman*. Earle's (2017) article examines framing techniques used in *My Friend Dahmer* and *Green River Killer* (Jensen & Case, 2011), offering readers insight into how artistic strategies used by the authors shape how readers experience the stories. Additional scholarship addressing *My Friend Dahmer* can be found in chapters in *Documentary Comics* (Mickwitz, 2016) and in *They Hurt, They Scar, They Shoot, They Kill: Toxic Characters in Young Adult Fiction* (Bodart, 2016). In these texts, researchers examine Backderf's use of visual elements to construct Jeffrey Dahmer's character; little scholarship has focused specifically on the language elements of the memoir.

While *My Friend Dahmer* is a graphic novel, read-ers gain information about Jeffrey's behaviors, thought processes, relationships, and actions through Backderf's language in speech bubbles and captions, the novel's introduction, and the commentary within the "Sources" and "Notes." As Kukkonen (2013) notes, "The dialogue in the speech bubbles anchors the image we see at a particular time and space, namely when the words are spoken" (p. 34). This is especially important given that Backderf moves readers back and forth in time throughout the novel. The words in the panels, along with supplementary information shared in the "Notes," help readers make

> I argue that using YAL featuring characters with mental illness can help reduce the stigma associated with psychological disorders.

sense of what Backderf knew about Dahmer and when. Thus, my attention in this research is specifically on the words rather than the images used in *My Friend Dahmer*.

This study aims to expand the scope of research in YAL by focusing on how an examination of the language used in *My Friend Dahmer* can help us understand Dahmer's behaviors, actions, emotions, and positioning within his community, as well as how stereotypes about mental illness might have mitigated Backderf's characterization of his "friend" Dahmer. My goal is to build on the work of Rose et al. (2007), as well as Parsons (2016), Thaller (2015), and others, to bring readers' focus to how language reflects and constructs reality, even in a graphic novel where images are the emphasis.

> In this study, I focus attention specifically on how Backderf's language choices shape readers' understandings of Jeffrey Dahmer and whether the terms the author uses are stereotypical (reflecting stigma), are authentic as defined by the DSM-5, are a combination of these, or are something else.

Critical Framework

In this study, I engage in critical content analysis, which focuses on a "critical examination of issues of stereotyping and misrepresentation in literature" and which "makes the researcher's stance explicit and public" (Short, 2017, p. 5–6). When conducting a critical content analysis, the researcher typically begins with a focus on an issue (e.g., mental illness); however, specific research questions are informed by data and the researcher's theoretical frame (Short, 2017). I consider Backderf's positioning of Dahmer in relation to his peers, family, and others in the small Midwestern town in which they live. I also reflect on the social mores of the period in which the story is set (1970s) and how Backderf's use of language might reflect the beliefs about mental illness of that time. As Short (2017) states, using critical content analysis requires the researcher to take on a "questioning stance"

focused on social issues and the "ways that language is used to shape representations of others" (p. 5). The researcher typically identifies a set of tenets related to the theoretical lens of focus, which in turn shapes the research questions. In this study, I focus attention specifically on how Backderf's language choices shape readers' understandings of Jeffrey Dahmer and whether the terms the author uses are stereotypical (reflecting stigma), are authentic as defined by the *DSM-5*, are a combination of these, or are something else.

I have consistently aimed to challenge and change the stigma associated with mental illness in our schools and communities (Richmond, 2014, 2017). Moreover, I engage in this research with an eye toward social change, both as a teacher educator and community member. Aligned with this position, Short (2017) argues that researchers should seek ways that texts "position characters as resistant to existing stereotypes and representations in order to develop counter-narratives, and to offer new possibilities for how to position ourselves in the world" (p. 6). Using a frame of critical content analysis fits with my intention to "transform conditions of inequity" (Short, 2017, p. 4). By scrutinizing how specific language is used by Backderf in describing Dahmer's behaviors and emotions (and his interactions with peers, family, and others), I highlight how the author's positioning of Dahmer is consistent with bias and stereotyping commonly associated with mental illness. My aim is to call attention to the ongoing problem of stigmatization of those who have psychological disorders.

Methodology

I examine *My Friend Dahmer* using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a theoretical framework and as a methodology of analysis. In their discussion of CDA as a conceptual framework, Sriwimon and Zilli (2017) explain that CDA's purpose is to demonstrate how ideological assumptions are concealed beneath language in text (p. 137). They note that though researchers working with CDA might be working with varied theories and attending to different issues, they are "bound by a concern for the investigation of the reproduction of ideology in language," examining how "certain social groups may be ill-represented or misrepresented in various types of discourse" (p. 137).

Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) argue that CDA views itself not as unbiased, but "as a critical approach which is politically committed to social change" (p. 64). The goal of CDA is to "uncover the role of discursive practice in the name of emancipation"; it "takes the side of oppressed social groups" with the aim of "harnessing the results" for "radical social change" (p. 64). This fits with Fairclough's (2013) explanation of CDA, which focuses primarily on the "effect of power relations and inequalities in producing social wrongs," which includes the questioning of ideology (p. 8).

Therefore, by using CDA, I consider specifically whether language used by the author *stigmatizes* (*oppresses*) members of a specific social group such as those with mental illness(es). At the root of CDA as a theoretical framework is the idea that human beings socially construct the world—and language, as a part of that world, is also socially constructed. CDA as a theoretical framework, therefore, is grounded in social constructivism, which posits that human beings, through interaction (including dialogue), construct reality (e.g., Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

I use also use critical discourse analysis (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002) to analyze and categorize how mental illness is represented in *My Friend Dahmer*. Critical discourse analysis has been used successfully as a research methodology in recent scholarship in YAL (Curwood, 2013; Glenn, 2008; Parsons, 2016). In this study, I engage in thematic analysis, a form of discourse analysis in which the researcher examines a text while considering whether specific repeated themes can be identified from the words included (Mogashoa, 2014). Specifically, I follow the approaches of Glenn (2008) and Parsons (2016) to develop "a broad understanding of the context" and probe for key themes related to portrayals of mental illness.

I read *My Friend Dahmer* three times for this study. During the first reading, I focused on understanding the images and language used by Backderf to tell the story of his experiences with Jeffrey Dahmer as a high school student in rural Ohio. Obtaining a sense of the narrative helps a researcher stay steeped in the data. During the second reading, I examined more closely the written language included in the graphic novel, creating a list of words used to describe Dahmer's behaviors, emotions, and actions, employing *in vivo* codes, as Strauss (1987) recommends, when-

ever possible. I attended especially to words used not only in the panels with images (e.g., speech bubbles and captions), but also in Backderf's commentary in the "Preface" and "Notes." Subsequently, I categorized the codes as having negative connotations, positive connotations, or neutral connotations (informational purpose).

Finally, reading the text a third time, I considered the *DSM-5* and relevant research related to stigma and mental illness, then classified the terms in the negative category according to three emergent themes: *stereotypes of mental illness, alcohol use, and sexual urges* (*paraphilia/necrophilia*). I also identified several subthemes, including derogatory terms, Dahmer as outcast, Dahmer as non-human, Dahmer as obsessed with animal corpses.

> **Therefore, by using CDA, I consider specifically whether language used by the author stigmatizes (oppresses) members of a specific social group such as those with mental illness(es).**

Findings

In this study, I discuss three themes identified during the analysis of language used by Backderf in *My Friend Dahmer*. The first focuses on stereotypes of mental illness. As mentioned previously, stereotypes are often grounded in common misconceptions about people with mental illness. For example, in a (2001) "Community Guide" provided by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, readers learn that some frequently held misunderstandings include the ideas that people with mental illness are "all potentially violent and dangerous," "responsible for their condition," and "have nothing positive to contribute" (p. 6). Fitting this misconception, Backderf characterizes Dahmer as someone to fear, as someone who decided to use alcohol to make himself numb, and as someone who could not control his urge to have sex with corpses. Portraying Dahmer in these ways allows Backderf to scrutinize his motives and paint for readers—through words—a portrait of an adolescent whose behaviors are stigmatized and whose fate, *without intervention*, seemed inevitable.

Stereotypes of Mental Illness

Several common stereotypes of mental illness can be identified in Backderf's language in *My Friend Dahmer*, including derogatory terms and references to Dahmer as an outcast, a non-human, and as obsessed with dead animals. Backderf's use of these terms and positioning of Dahmer demonstrate the author's stigmatizing attitude toward his classmate. Stigma, as Overton and Medina (2008) remind readers, comes from the judgment of a person by himself or herself (self-stigma) or from a group of individuals who determine whether or not a person fits within accepted social standards (p. 144). Backderf's use of pejorative terms in describing Dahmer's behaviors establishes his stigmatizing stance toward those with mental illness. When combined with his situating of Dahmer as someone who was considered an outsider, even by the marginal group of "band nerds and advanced-placement brains" in which Backderf maintained membership (p. 47), and as someone whose mother was known to have been sent to a "mental ward" (p. 64), Backderf's stereotyping of Dahmer is almost predictable if not for his positioning of Dahmer as "my friend" in the title of the book.

> Backderf's language is a conscientious choice, one he made after reflecting upon his own memories of interacting with Dahmer and after interviewing "dozens of former classmates" and "several teachers who worked at Revere High" (p. 200).

Derogatory Terms

In the memoir, Backderf uses many derogatory terms associated with stereotypes of mental illness. These include references to Dahmer's behaviors (e.g., "struggling" [p. 10], "stalking strangers" [p. 162], "crazy spaz shtick" [p. 64], "cruel laugh" [p. 89]), labels meaning not of sound mind (e.g., "twisted" [p. 11], "depraved" [p. 37], "tortured" [p. 83], "crazy" [p. 64], "sick and twisted" [p. 81], "strange" [p. 47], "truly scary" [p. 132]), movement (e.g., "plunged off the brink" and "descent" [p. 10]), or an alternate reality

(e.g., "living hell" [p. 168] and "horror show" [p. 123]). Many of the terms used in the book match the most commonly occurring terms identified by Rose et al. (2007), including the following (from their Table 1, p. 97): *spastic, crazy, insane, freak, odd, scary, loneliness (lonely), and psycho.* Given that the author had access to authentic terminology in interview transcripts in which FBI agents and psychologists spoke with Dahmer (p. 200), Backderf's choice to employ derogatory terms associated with stereotypes seems intentional.

In the same way that Backderf as a graphic artist chose how to present Dahmer's character through specific artistic techniques, Backderf as a writer chose the specific words he uses to describe Dahmer. Backderf's language is a conscientious choice, one he made *after* reflecting upon his own memories of interacting with Dahmer and *after* interviewing "dozens of former classmates" and "several teachers who worked at Revere High" (p. 200). The author explains that he also researched news accounts, FBI files, and Dahmer's father's book for supplemental information (p. 201). Whether Backderf is aware of how his language is stigmatizing is not really relevant; the outcome, the othering of Dahmer, is accomplished through the derogatory terms he uses.

Dahmer as Outcast

Backderf includes language throughout *My Friend Dahmer* that reproduces stereotypes and categorizes Dahmer as an *outcast* or *other*. Backderf includes the following phrases specifically about Dahmer: "nobody" (p. 30), "ignored" (p. 84), "loneliest kid" (p. 33), "shy geek" (p. 51), "oddball" (p. 10), "lost" (p. 123), "alone" (p. 165), "twisted wretch" (p. 11), "creepy" (p. 60), and several versions of "freak" (pp. 26, 49, 51, 111, 198). Situating Jeffrey Dahmer as an outsider both at school and at home, Backderf tells readers that Dahmer was "invisible" and that it took him "months to notice him" when they started at Revere High (p. 30). Backderf also mentions Dahmer's connection to other students who existed on the periphery of the social community within the high school; he refers to these students as "social invalids," "psycho wretches," and a "leper colony" (pp. 30, 150).

Backderf contrasts Dahmer's "bizarre behavior" with that of another classmate, Lloyd Figg, whom

the author considered a "maniac" (p. 49). Despite Dahmer's flat affect—a "stony mask of a face devoid of any emotion" (p. 50), Backderf considered Dahmer more "normal" than Figg (p. 49). In the book's "Notes" section, Backderf explains that Figg was regularly regarded as the "class psycho" and was reported to enjoy "running over animals in his car" (p. 211). The author's categorizing of individuals based on their mental illness status fits with what Parcesepe and Cabassa (2013) found in their research on public stigma: "Children and adults endorsed stigmatizing beliefs of people with mental illness, especially the belief that such individuals are prone to violent behaviors, and stigmatizing actions [. . .] in the form of social distance" (p. 12).

Backderf also illustrates the social distance between Dahmer, himself, and his friends when he says in a caption, "We weren't putting him down. After all, we weren't a whole lot higher up the social ladder" (p. 51). Despite his protest that they were not belittling Dahmer, Backderf's comment demonstrates that he viewed himself and his friends as more advanced members of the social hierarchy of Revere High School. The author's decision to characterize Dahmer as an outcast fits with research on stigmatizing behavior, such as that reported by Corrigan, Green, Lundin, Kubiak, and Penn (2001), who note that people who "perpetuate stigma are likely to socially distance themselves from persons with mental illness" (p. 953). Backderf states that he specifically didn't ask Dahmer to join him while he and his friends were joy-riding around town, despite the fact that Backderf "drove right past his house on the way to pick up some of the other guys" (p. 60). He states, "Some instinct warned me off. I was always wary of Dahmer" (p. 60). In making this statement, and others in which he distances himself from Jeffrey Dahmer, Backderf protects himself from being associated too closely with a person with mental illness. This action fits with Overton and Medina's (2008) explanation of "avoidance" as a form of social distancing that contributes to the maintenance of an "ideal identity" and allows the author and friends to exploit Dahmer as a member of a "subordinate" group (p. 145).

Dahmer as Non-human

Twice in *My Friend Dahmer*, Backderf refers to Dahmer as non-human. In the Preface, Dahmer is called a "monster" (p. 11) because of his decision to murder. Later, in Part 3 ("The Dahmer Fan Club"), the author says Dahmer "didn't register as a real person. He moved through the day unnoticed" (p. 119). Backderf's descriptions are colored by his knowledge of Dahmer as a serial killer in his adulthood. They also reinforce the stigma historically associated with mental illness. Foucault (1988/1965) explains that until the 1800s, "madmen remained monsters—that is, etymologically, beings or things to be shown" (p. 70).

When individuals are not viewed as human, acts of prejudice and "bias-motivated violence" can become easier to justify (e.g., the Anti-Defamation League's [ADL] 2018 "Pyramid of Hate"). Backderf's inclusion of a scene in which he and his friends discuss Dahmer's differences seems to follow this pattern. For example, one of Backderf's friends asks, "What's the deal with Dahmer? Is he insane?" (p. 48). By labeling him this way, the author's friend calls attention to the possibility of Dahmer's mental illness and positions him as other.

> **In making this statement, and others in which he distances himself from Jeffrey Dahmer, Backderf protects himself from being associated too closely with a person with mental illness.**

Moreover, Dahmer is more easily manipulated by the group because as someone who is a monster, he is not entitled to the sympathetic treatment afforded other members of the group. Backderf tells readers that Dahmer was "more mascot than pal" in their group of friends (p. 56). As the mascot (of the "Dahmer Fan Club," of which Backderf was self-appointed President, then Minister of Propaganda," p. 205), Dahmer is a caricature. Backderf tells readers he frequently drew sketches of Dahmer as "a bag of groceries" or "a telephone pole" (p. 57). By labeling Dahmer a monster, as insane, and by associating him with inanimate objects (even under the pretense of a joke), Backderf succeeds in stigmatizing Dahmer as someone to be avoided.

Dahmer as Obsessed with Animal Corpses

Backderf also draws readers' attention to the main

character's obsession with animal corpses. In one set of panels in Part 1 ("The Strange Boy"), Backderf shows images of Dahmer stealing a preserved specimen of a fetal pig from school. Likewise, in Part 2 ("A Secret Life"), the image of Dahmer stabbing a just-caught fish, chopping its macerated body into pieces in order to "see what it looked like," is included (p. 78).

The author also uses specific language to describe Dahmer's collection of animal bodies. In Part 1, Backderf describes an interaction between Dahmer and neighborhood youth. Dahmer, carrying the carcass of a deceased cat, is confronted by some boys in the woods near his home. One says, "Hey! Why are you carrying around a . . . EW! . . . DEAD CAT!?!" (p. 20). After Dahmer shows them his collection of specimens of decomposing animals in his "hut," explaining that he likes to "study . . . the bones" (p. 23), the boys run away gagging before saying, "Gawd, Dahmer, you are such a freak!" (p. 26). In another scene in Part 2, Backderf shows several panels in which Dahmer catches and plans to kill a neighborhood dog. In the "Notes," the author tells readers that Dahmer described the incident to the FBI in an interview (p. 209). Though Dahmer decided to let the dog go without killing it, Backderf says it was the "first time Jeff considered butchering not just roadkill or small animals but a creature large enough to feel fear and pain" (p. 106).

Backderf, in choosing to highlight Dahmer's obsession with corpses and the intention to kill and mutilate animals, sets him up as a character with the capacity to murder human beings. In fact, the author tells readers that letting the dog go without killing it was the "last time" that Dahmer would "show . . . mercy" (p. 106), despite the fact that it would be several years before Dahmer would kill his first victim, Steven Hicks, a hitchhiker he picked up "on a whim" (p. 213).

> **Backderf's portrayal of teenage Dahmer features multiple symptoms of Alcohol Use Disorder, which is defined by the DSM-5 as a "problematic pattern of alcohol use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress" (p. 490).**

Alcohol Use Disorder

Backderf's portrayal of teenage Dahmer features multiple symptoms of Alcohol Use Disorder, which is defined by the *DSM-5* as a "problematic pattern of alcohol use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress" (p. 490). To be diagnosed with the disorder, individuals must demonstrate having at least two of the following symptoms during a one-year period: drinking more frequently or in larger amounts than previously customary; a persistent desire or unsuccessful attempts to "cut down or control alcohol usage" (p. 490); significant time spent obtaining or using alcohol, or recovering from its effects; experiencing cravings for alcohol; repeated use of alcohol, leading to a failure to accomplish duties at work, school, or home; continued use of alcohol despite social problems caused or worsened by alcohol's effects; the giving up or reduction of important work or social activities because of alcohol use; use of alcohol in situations that are dangerous physically; and continued use of alcohol in spite of having "a physical or psychological problem that is likely to have been caused or exacerbated by alcohol" (p. 491). Additionally, individuals said to possess Alcohol Use Disorder either have a need for an increasing amount of alcohol to attain intoxication or a "markedly diminished effect with continued use of the same amount of alcohol" (p. 491). Note also that withdrawal is listed as a criterion of Alcohol Use Disorder.

Backderf tells readers that Dahmer's "solution" to having "constant thoughts of corpses and entrails [that] titillated him" and "filled him with revulsion and a growing sense of panic" was alcohol (p. 81). Dahmer used alcohol to make himself "numb" (p. 82). Backderf notes that other than one week of his junior year—when Dahmer "laid off the sauce" during a school trip to Washington, DC (p. 95)—Dahmer drank daily at school, sinking into an "alcoholic fog" (p. 98). Dahmer drank increasingly more alcohol, hiding bottles at school so that he could slip out to drink during "study hall, lunch period, or a class run by a teacher with a lax attendance policy" (p. 98). During their senior year, Backderf explains that Dahmer's "need for liquor was now so great" that he carried a briefcase each day to have access to alcohol (p. 124).

Dahmer never drank at home out of "fear of being caught in the act by his family"; therefore, he typically arrived at Revere High School "well before the morning bell" and stayed "long past dismissal late into

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the evening" (p. 125). The author notes, "[E]very kid knew what Dahmer was doing . . . but not a single teacher or school administrator noticed a thing. Not one" (p. 84). Backderf asks multiple times in the text where the adults in Dahmer's life were. The teenaged Dahmer "reeked of booze" as early as 7:45 in the morning, yet not one teacher or other adult "stepped up and said, 'Whoa, this kid needs help'" (p. 87). A guidance counselor from the school, who was interviewed later by the *Akron Beacon Journal*, said that she didn't see "any signs that [Dahmer] was different or strange" (p. 85).

Readers are given a glimpse into Dahmer's tumultuous home life, one in which his parents argued constantly, especially during his last year of high school when they were divorcing and Joyce Dahmer (Jeffrey's mother) acquired a "restraining order against Lionel [his father]" (p. 128). Though we do not see Dahmer going through withdrawal, Backderf tells readers that nights for teenage Dahmer "must have been the hardest after the numbing effect of the booze wore off" (p. 128). In the next scene, Backderf and his friends pick up Dahmer to take him for his "command performance" at the local mall, during which he would pretend to have a fit and imitate his mother's interior decorator, Mr. Burlman, with exaggerated jerky movements and gasps of "Baaaaa!!" as he "waylaid unsuspecting shoppers" (pp. 129–139). During their 10-minute drive to the mall, Dahmer guzzles a six-pack of beer, a sight that Backderf had never seen before. It was at this point that Backderf says the "aura of doom that surrounded Dahmer finally came into focus for [him], with startling clarity" (p. 133). After this interaction with Jeffrey Dahmer, Backderf and his friends "excluded" him from their group (stigma), which left Dahmer with "only the voices in his head" as they "grew louder and louder" (p. 143).

Backderf's portrayal of Dahmer as a teenager with alcohol use problems supports the premise that Dahmer had at least one mental illness that negatively affected his relationships with peers. Silva, Ferrari, and Leong (2002) report that Dahmer's problems with alcohol developed during adolescence; moreover, he was "discharged from the Army due to alcohol-associated difficulties in occupational performance" (p. 3). While Dahmer's excessive alcohol use was detected by Backderf and other peers during high school, his attraction to dead (or unconscious) male bodies was

not discernable at that time. Backderf tells readers that Dahmer was "tortured every waking hour by ghastly sexual fantasies" and "urges that were growing stronger and stronger, urges he could only dull with alcohol" (p. 83).

Paraphilia/Necrophilia

The author's characterization of Jeffrey Dahmer includes language that fits with symptoms of necrophilia, which is classified under Paraphilic Disorders in the *DSM-5*. Paraphilia signifies an "intense and persistent sexual interest other than sexual interest in genital stimulation or preparatory fondling with phenotypically normal, physically mature, consenting human partners" (*DSM-5*, 2013, p. 685). A paraphilic disorder is identified in an individual for whom paraphilia causes "distress or impairment to the individual" or whose "satisfaction has entailed personal harm, or risk of harm, to others" (p. 685). Necrophilia, specifically, involves a recurring and intense sexual arousal by corpses.

> **Backderf's portrayal of Dahmer as a teenager with alcohol use problems supports the premise that Dahmer had at least one mental illness that negatively affected his relationships with peers.**

Dahmer's attraction to dead bodies is included in several parts of Backderf's narrative. Readers are told that Dahmer had a "terrible secret": in his fantasies, "his lovers . . . were dead. Dead men. Corpses" (p. 54). Backderf asks readers what might have "spawned this perverse sexual hunger? What deep fetid part of his psyche gurgled up this miscreant desire, so powerfully voracious it immediately devoured him whole?" (p. 55). Dahmer was "obsessed" with a jogger who ran past his rural home each day; he had fantasies about lying next to the man's "unconscious body, about fondling him and having 'total control' over him" (p. 58). He laid in wait for the jogger one afternoon during ninth or tenth grade, ready to knock him out with a baseball bat; however, the man did not happen to run by that day. Dahmer then "wrested back control from the dark urges that churned in his head. At least, for a while . . ." (p. 59). In the detailed

author's notes following the text, Backderf shares that Dahmer repeatedly expressed a desire for "complete control" or "total dominance" over his victims (pp. 205, 213).

Just before *My Friend Dahmer*'s last section, "Part 5: Fade to Black," readers learn that Dahmer's mother decided to take his younger brother and relocate to Wisconsin, leaving Jeffrey alone in the house until his father moved back in. After he graduated from Revere High, Dahmer's "life essentially ended" (p. 167). A month later (June 1978), Dahmer got drunk, then drove around before picking up a hitchhiker. Backderf's author notes identify the hitchhiker as Steven Hicks, who Dahmer knocked unconscious, strangled, and fondled before masturbating repeatedly while standing over the body. When Backderf shares with readers at the end of the book that his classmate had been discovered in 1991 in an "apartment full of bodies" and that the murderer had had "sex with the corpses" and "ate some of them," he first thought it was Figg, another Revere High student. His second guess was correct, however, and his response was, "Oh my God, Dahmer. . . . What have you done?" (p. 224).

> These demonstrations of Dahmer's anguish and guilt related to his sexual urges and actions fit with the distress associated with a paraphilic disorder (necrophilia).

The language Backderf uses to describe Dahmer's tendencies and sexual attraction to corpses fits the *DSM-5*'s definition of necrophilia. The author's use of terms such as "perverse" (p. 55), "depravity" (p. 11), and "bizarre desire" (p. 58) clearly denotes the stigma generally associated with sexual attractions that are outside of the social norm. Note that to be a paraphilic disorder, the disorder must cause "marked distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning" (DSM-5, 2013, p. 686). Backderf says that Dahmer could not explain why his "fantasies" included "lovers [who were] dead. Dead men. Corpses" (p. 54). In one panel when he is fantasizing alone, Dahmer says, "AAAAARG," and the caption states that he says, "I don't know where it came from [. . . .] But I never dreamed it would become a real-

ity" (p. 55). In the last section of the book, Dahmer is pulled over by the police and given a sobriety test. Grateful that the officers did not find the body of Steven Hicks that he had contained in trash bags in the back of his car, Dahmer says, "UUUNGH! Gulp! Choke! Sob! Wheeze! Gasp! Sob!" (p. 184). These demonstrations of Dahmer's anguish and guilt related to his sexual urges and actions fit with the distress associated with a paraphilic disorder (necrophilia).

It is relevant to note, however, that at least one researcher (as noted in Silva et al., 2002) argues that Dahmer did not "suffer from primary necrophilia because he preferred live sexual partners" (p. 3). Rosman and Resnick's (1989) research on individuals with necrophilia found that 80% of those with what they termed "pseudonecrophilia" had a "transient attraction to a corpse" but a preference for "sexual contact with living partners" (pp. 154–155) and consumed alcohol before committing their acts, compared to 60% of those who killed to obtain a corpse for sexual purposes (p. 158). Dahmer is shown drinking before he picks up Steven Hicks (p. 172), but the author does not include any details of Dahmer's other murders. Since the main focus of *My Friend Dahmer* is specifically on a period in high school and just after, Backderf chooses to discuss the other murders in his "Notes" section.

Conclusion

Backderf's language choices certainly influence readers' understandings of Jeffrey Dahmer. And while most of the terms used are reflective of frequently used stereotypes about those with mental illness (e.g., that they are dangerous, responsible for their disorders, should be feared and ostracized), some of Backderf's phrases fit with those used in the *DSM-5*, especially with regard to alcohol use disorder and paraphilia.

Multiple times throughout the book, Backderf contends that Dahmer did not have to end up a "monster" who took the lives of multiple victims. The author blames the "adults in his life" who were "inexplicably, unforgivably, incomprehensibly clueless and/or indifferent" (p. 11) and who ignored Dahmer's extensive alcohol use, erratic behavior and emotions, and appalling home life; in fact, he argues that perhaps Dahmer's destiny as a serial killer could

have been averted. He tells readers that some people view Dahmer as "some kind of anti-hero, a bullied kid who lashed back at the society that rejected him" (p. 11). However, he also identifies Dahmer as "a twisted wretch" who is deserving of pity but not empathy. Backderf places the blame squarely on Dahmer's head once he kills.

The author includes a list of "The Players," and on it, he calls Dahmer a "coward" because he was "afraid to confess to his dad [. . .] about what was going on in his head" (p. 221). This accusation positions Backderf as a person who does not recognize the self-stigma associated with mental illness for many individuals. Research (Corrigan et al., 2010) suggests that self-stigma can negatively affect individuals (decreased self-esteem and self-efficacy); moreover, disclosing one's status as having a mental illness could expose the individual to more shame or prejudice. Additionally, Backderf states that the "only tragedy" after Dahmer killed Hicks in 1978 is that "Dahmer didn't have the courage to put a gun to his head and end it" (p. 221). This statement—that Dahmer should have committed suicide—also seems to position Backderf as flippant and takes away from his ethos. While it is understandable for Backderf to express righteous indignation about the loss of 17 lives (Dahmer's victims), young adult readers could misunderstand Backderf's dismissive attitude toward suicide as condoning the act.

In a systematic review of literature about public stigma toward mental illness in the US, Parcesepe and Cabassa (2013) found that stigmatizing beliefs about the dangerousness of individuals with mental illness have risen over time, and that beliefs of "shame, blame, incompetency, punishment, and criminality of people with mental illness are common." The language used in *My Friend Dahmer* reflects these beliefs. Even when he considers what might have happened to Dahmer if adults *had* intervened, Backderf says, "He probably would have spent the rest of his days doped up on antidepressants and living in his dad's spare room. A sad, lonely life that Dahmer would have gladly accepted over the hellish future that awaited him" (p. 87). In this depiction of Jeffrey Dahmer, Backderf's assumptions about persons with mental illness are clearly tied to commonly held stereotypes: these individuals are isolated and miser-

able, sedated and dependent on others, incapable of providing for their own basic needs.

Strategies for Educators

Educators who want to use *My Friend Dahmer* should be cognizant of Backderf's use of language, which consistently replicates stereotypes about mental illness. To help student readers consider connections between language and stigma, teachers might bring in supporting texts while asking students to examine Backderf's choices of terms and their connotations.

For instance, the Anti-Defamation League's (2018) "Pyramid of Hate" illustrates biased behaviors that increase in complexity, with more life-threatening concerns displayed at the top of the pyramid. Two of the categories at the bottom of the pyramid include "Biased Attitudes"—which involve behaviors such as stereotyping or accepting negative information or misinformation—and "Biased Acts"—which include "name-calling," "slurs/epithets," and "de-humanization." Students might examine how Backderf's use of language fits within the pyramid's description of biased attitudes and acts.

In this depiction of Jeffrey Dahmer, Backderf's assumptions about persons with mental illness are clearly tied to commonly held stereotypes: these individuals are isolated and miserable, sedated and dependent on others, incapable of providing for their own basic needs.

Lea Winerman (2014), in an article in the APA-sponsored *Monitor on Psychology* ("Words Matter"), offers educators a way to start a discussion about media representations of those with mental illness. Students could talk about why the use of person-first language (e.g., "She is a person with schizophrenia") and the avoidance of "derogatory language" (e.g., "psycho" or "junkie") are important in news reports. Teachers might also have students investigate how a particular mental illness has been represented in newspaper articles, television news, or online reports. A 2012 National Public Radio (NPR) blog written by

Edward Schumacher-Matos is one such report. The blog posting focuses on a reporter's use of the term "nutcase" when asking a lawyer about a client's mental illness status. Examining the NPR posting could help students discuss ethical, legal, and moral issues related to language use in the media and extend that conversation to the relationship between language and stigma.

While *My Friend Dahmer* does include authentic representations of alcohol use disorder and paraphilic disorder (necrophilia) as defined by the *DSM-5*, the author characterizes Jeffrey Dahmer and Lloyd Figg in some ways as outcasts. Backderf maintains that Dahmer was a "tragic figure" (p. 88 and p. 221) but not "entirely sympathetic" (p. 88). Educators might ask readers to consider whether Dahmer's representation fits with the characteristics of a Byronic hero, "a boldly defiant but bitterly self-tormenting outcast, proudly contemptuous of social norms but suffering for some unnamed sin" (Baldick, 2008). At ReadWriteThink.org, Joyce Bruett provides a high school lesson plan sequence entitled "Looking for the Byronic Hero Using *Twilight's* Edward Cullen" that might prove useful.

Additional young adult texts about serial killers include Dia Reeves's (2011) *Slice of Cherry*, Barry Lyga's (2012) *I Hunt Killers*, Stefan Petrucha's (2012) *Ripper*, and Dan Wells's (2010) *I Am Not a Serial Killer*—all of which are fiction. Three adult texts that might interest mature readers include Joyce Carol Oates's (1995) fiction novel *Zombie*, Ann Rule's (1980) memoir, *The Stranger beside Me*, and Claudia Rowe's (2017) memoir, *The Spider and the Fly*.

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Alyssa **Chrisman**

Living with It:
Disabling Depictions of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder in Young Adult Literature

The last chapter of Hesser's (1998) book *Kissing Doorknobs* is titled "Living with It." As the first notable young adult (YA) novel to feature a protagonist with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), the majority of the story focuses on protagonist Tara's struggles with her obsessive thought patterns and subsequent compulsions, as well as her search for a diagnosis, but this chapter preludes a life of managing a future with OCD. Tara acknowledges that she once again might feel unable to control her obsessions and compulsions and that her future will require strength and the support of others. As she touches hands with her romantic interest through the barriers of a door and gloves, Tara thinks:

> It was hard. But with this small gesture, we were fighting back. We weren't paralyzed . . . or crushed by the monster. We didn't fold or drop out. We summoned the courage to play the cards life had dealt each of us. Reluctant, insecure warriors but warriors all the same. And we weren't alone. (p. 149)

This ending not only suggests Tara's future, but it sets the stage for future young adult novels that depict OCD. While the majority of books published since 1998 feature characters searching for a diagnosis, a few of them illustrate the potential of Hesser's final chapter, of what it is like to live with OCD.

Reading Tara's story from a disability studies perspective illuminates problems that, unfortunately, are evident in many young adult novels about non-abled bodies and minds. Typically, narratives about disability align with what is known as the "medical model," focusing on a biomedical "problem" assumed to lower an individual's quality of life or the cure to that problem. Through Tara's search for and eventual attainment of an accurate diagnosis and successful treatment, *Kissing Doorknobs* emphasizes this perspective. The social model that disability studies often embrace, however, focuses on the negative ways that society contributes to, and even shapes, disability: "prejudice and discrimination, inaccessibility, and the lack of accommodations" (Longmore as qtd. in Dunn, 2015, p. 6). In this regard, books that align with a disability studies perspective may create visibility, specifically "questioning representational systems [and] giving voice to experiences once ignored or erased" (Fox, 2017, para. 3). As a former classroom teacher and a person with OCD, I understand that having accurate and nuanced depictions of disability generally, and OCD specifically, does positive work for both readers who personally identify with these stories and readers without these experiences.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2016), 20% of youth ages 13 through 18 live with a mental health condition. Fifty percent of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14. OCD, an anxiety disorder that consists of both unwanted ideas and behaviors, affects a smaller percentage of young adults but is arguably more stigmatized and misunderstood than other disorders. For example, many people misattribute OCD to people who are Type-A, but OCD is a lot more complicated than simply being particular and organized. People with this disorder often have obsessions, "recurrent thoughts, impulses, and images that are experienced as intrusive, unwanted, and

inappropriate and cause marked anxiety," which they manage through compulsions, "repetitive behaviors or mental acts that the person feels driven to perform in response to an obsession to reduce anxiety" (Youth Mental Health First Aid USA, 2016). Obsessions and compulsions can be debilitating, which makes it frustrating when OCD is turned into an adjective used nonchalantly. This misinformation is also harmful because it can make it difficult for people with obsessions and compulsions to identify what is happening and find resources; it can also contribute to self-stigma and create a barrier to community building and advocacy efforts within this population.

In an effort to find the books that best represent OCD, I read as many of the published young adult novels featuring protagonists with this disorder that I could locate, ultimately identifying 19 texts—from Hesser's initial novel to John Green's (2017) *Turtles All the Way Down*. As I examined these books, I coded them based on criteria such as the author's experience with OCD, the narrative point of view, whether or not the character was explicitly diagnosed (and if so, when that occurs in the text), the alleged "cause" of the disorder (e.g., biological, hereditary, stemming from trauma), how the character is "treated," and what types of support the character has (e.g., parental, peer, school).[1]

In my analysis, I found that most of the existing literature contributes to narrative tropes of disability. The analyzed titles can be categorized in three ways: 1) books where OCD is not explicitly mentioned in the text but is mentioned elsewhere, such as in paratext or the book's tags; 2) books about finding a diagnosis; and 3) books about living with OCD. The three novels that I analyze in this paper are all from the third category. Each book has a narrator who is diagnosed with OCD prior to the start of the story, resulting in more complex plots than the problem novel structure that books about finding a diagnosis often follow. I have chosen these three novels because of their popularity; they vastly outweigh all of the other books via ratings on Goodreads, with 75% of the ratings from all 19 books that depict OCD belonging to the three I have chosen. Given the larger readership inherent in this popularity, it is especially critical that we understand how OCD is depicted. Using Dunn's (2015) *Disabling Characters* as a framework, I illustrate how Tamara Ireland Stone's (2015) *Every Last Word* falls short in

its narrative, while Patrick Ness's (2015) *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* and John Green's (2017) *Turtles All the Way Down* create space for alternate and inclusive representations of OCD. Finally, I conclude with pedagogical strategies for including these books in classroom curricula.

Literature Review

Mental illness visibility in young adult literature is important. Williams (2015) writes about the discomfort that readers might face when reading about their own conditions. However, she argues:

> Seeing anxiety, depression, OCD, and other mental health disorders on the printed page, being struggled with, surmounted, lived with and accepted, and examined in empathetic and enlightening ways, is enormously important, especially when mental health issues among teenagers are on the rise. (para. 8)

Corbett and Schmidt (2016) make a similar argument. They assert that teachers who incorporate young adult literature featuring mental illness in their classrooms could help raise awareness about mental health issues (p. 92). Such an awareness can reduce stigma and "enable those suffering from mental illness a chance to be seen, a chance to let go of the shame they may feel for being stereotyped" (p. 92). Corbett and Schmidt (2016) contend that mental illness visibility in young adult literature serves two purposes: 1) it helps readers with mental illness see themselves reflected when they often lack representation; and 2) it helps challenge stereotypes and stigmas that readers without experience or contact with people with mental illness may hold.

> **Obsessions and compulsions can be debilitating, which makes it frustrating when OCD is turned into an adjective used nonchalantly.**

Additionally, Scrofano (2015) focuses specifically on the importance of practitioners in crafting visibility, arguing that people who work in schools and libraries play a critical role in cultivating accessibility to the literature. Her perspective is more than scholarly; it is personal. She admits that this visibility would have been helpful to her as a teenager beginning to suffer

with the symptoms of OCD. Similarly, Jensen (2015) writes: "[T]hose who work with youth in libraries must be aware of the prevalence of and types of mental health issues facing teens [. . . .] [U]nderstanding what teens may be struggling with can help us better respond to and meet their needs" (para. 7). According to these viewpoints, teachers and librarians share an obligation to make the literature that teenagers need accessible.

Although these authors advocate for the presence of mental illness in young adult literature, there is little focus in the field on individual mental illnesses; instead, they are all lumped together as one category. In addition, minimal attention is paid to the accuracy and authenticity of the portrayal of mental illness in the books themselves. Dunn (2015) argues that literature does cultural work, and many ableist texts "often blithely and uncritically [draw] upon disability myths or stereotypes, thus cementing them even further" (p. 9). Young adults need books that are accurate and authentic in their representations of mental illness, and they need to develop the critical thinking skills that will help them "recognize and resist discriminatory views" (p. 9). Yet, these books are generally not featured in curricula, and there is a lack of scholarship on the merits of these texts and how to incorporate them into classrooms. Therefore, it is important to get a sense of how mental health conditions, such as OCD, are portrayed in YA literature and to make responsible decisions when including these books in our classrooms. This article helps to fill an existing gap in the literature regarding how OCD is depicted in young adult novels, providing practitioners with detailed textual analysis and specific pedagogical strategies.

Theoretical Framework

In critically analyzing these books, I draw on Dunn's (2015) *Disabling Characters: Representations of Dis-*

> [I]t is important to get a sense of how mental health conditions, such as OCD, are portrayed in YA literature and to make responsible decisions when including these books in our classrooms.

ability in Young Adult Literature. Like the aforementioned authors, she agrees that fiction can impact people in the real world, writing that "it can open readers' minds to entrenched discriminatory attitudes, or it can be complicit with those attitudes, making them worse" (p. 1). She applies this idea to representations of disability in young adult literature and argues that the framework of "disabling characters" has a double meaning. "Disabling characters" with ill effects can reinforce the discrimination and exclusion that disabled people face. Dunn argues that this can happen as a result of "the stereotypical way in which disabled characters are portrayed; a tired plot structure in which they die or get cured in the end, suggesting there's no place for disability in mainstream society; and, unchallenged discriminatory remarks reflecting assumptions of an ableist society" (p. 2). Alternatively, authentic and nuanced "disabling characters" can "challenge or 'disable' myths about disability" (p. 2). These characters can draw attention to the social construct of disability, which argues that disability is a problem because society is not built for it. They can also make "decisions and act in ways that determine their own fate, thus countering pervasive narratives that depict them as pitiable, helpless, sad, etc,"; they can also display agency while verbally challenging myths and stereotypes (p. 2).

Awareness of such characterization can help educators make responsible choices when including these books in their classrooms. Dunn (2015) offers the following questions as starting places for critical analyses of texts in classrooms:

- How is disability represented in this text?
- What are some implications of those representations for individuals in the real world?
- To what extent are harmful stereotypes about disability cultivated, disrupted, or both?

In my article, I consider these questions as I evaluate how OCD is depicted in these narratives. Specifically, I look at two common disability tropes: the supercrip and the myth of a cure. For my analysis, I focus on Schalk's (2016) explanation of the superpowered supercrip narrative: "a representation of a character who has abilities or 'powers' that operate in direct relationship with or contrast to their disability" (p. 81). Sometimes these can be literal superpowers, but I focus on enhanced detective skills. The myth of cure

references a narrative trope where a disabled character is either cured or killed by the end of the story (Dolmage, 2014, p. 34).

Textual Summaries and Analysis

The three books that I explore demonstrate disabling characters in both negative and positive ways. *Every Last Word* by Tamara Ireland Stone (2015) is narrated by high school junior Sam McAllister, who is Pure-O (pure-obsessional), meaning that her obsessions are not managed with observable compulsions; she was diagnosed at 11 years old. She goes to therapy every Wednesday and struggles to feel a connection to her friend group. Sam meets fellow classmate Caroline, who introduces her to Poet's Corner, a secret group in which students gather and read poetry to each other. While Sam wants to move past needing medication and therapy, her condition worsens throughout the novel, and it is revealed that Caroline exists within her imagination, modeled after an actual girl from their school who committed suicide several years prior.

Patrick Ness's (2015) *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* is told from the perspective of Mikey, whose story follows three threads: his relationship with his sisters Mel and Meredith, his attraction to his friend Henna and jealousy of newcomer Nathan, and his friendship with Jared. Affecting them all is a mysterious supernatural force in his town that is bringing animals back to life, possessing the police officers, and killing the indie kids (Ness's term for Mikey's unnamed peers), who are destined to put a stop to it all. Mikey and his friends are on the sidelines, just hoping to get through the school year, graduate, and go to college.

The most recently published of these books, John Green's (2017) *Turtles All the Way Down* features first-person protagonist Aza, a 16-year-old girl trying to solve the mystery of her childhood friend's missing father, all while grappling with the development of a romantic relationship, feeling distant from her best friend, and experiencing worsening compulsions.

By juxtaposing these narratives, I hope to illustrate critical analysis of OCD portrayal in the most read relevant books. While I argue that Ness's and Green's books better represent OCD, I also aim to show how depiction of this disability is complicated. A book may do a particularly great job in one aspect, but it may be lacking in others. Thus, examining the

books as a whole allows for a more nuanced analysis. For educators, a cohesive understanding of the book's representation can help guide pedagogical decision making, such as what questions to ask students.

Within my analysis, I recognize the limitations regarding intersectionality that exist not only in these three texts, but also in the larger group of 19 novels that I originally analyzed. In Crenshaw's (1989) analysis of race and sex, she argues that "limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group" erases the experiences of multiply minoritized people (p. 140). Accordingly, these books represent disabled characters who are often missing or misrepresented in popular narratives, but their protagonists are also white, middle or upper class, and heterosexual—in other words, otherwise privileged. It is important to remember, then, that contrary to its typical cultural representation, mental illness does not just affect straight, white people. An almost equal percentage of white people (19.3%) and black people (18.6%) live with a mental health condition (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2015). In the LGBTQ+ community, these individuals are "2 or more times more likely as straight individuals to have a mental health condition," and LGBTQ+ youth are "2 to 3 times more likely to attempt suicide than straight youth" (Mental Health Facts: Multicultural). As I argue for the inclusion of *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* and *Turtles All the Way Down* in classrooms, I do so with keen awareness that more non-white, non-heterosexual narrators are needed in YA literature.

Depicting OCD
Since OCD is arguably one of the most misunderstood mental illnesses, it is important that books featuring characters with this condition depict the experience in a realistic way. When considering book selection, Jensen (2015) argues that librarians need to choose books with appropriate representations of the lives of young adults. She notes: "Librarians . . . need to

> **For educators, a cohesive understanding of the book's representation can help guide pedagogical decision making, such as what questions to ask students.**

look for titles that present the issues authentically and without judgment or stigma" (para. 9). While judgment and stigma may exist in the novels, as they do in teenagers' lives, it is important that the texts challenge these notions. Jensen (2015) also suggests that titles that perpetuate stereotypes, make readers feel ashamed, or propose that mental illness is not a medical condition that can be treated must be avoided. Williams (2015) argues that the presentations of mental illness in texts "don't always need to be centre-stage—but they do need to be well-researched, acknowledged, and treated with respect due to any potentially life-threatening illness" (para. 8). Mental illness impacts teenagers in a very serious way, so a misrepresentation of an illness can have dangerous consequences.

> **While judgment and stigma may exist in the novels, as they do in teenagers' lives, it is important that the texts challenge these notions.**

Every Last Word begins its complicated portrayal by appearing to challenge traditional OCD stereotypes. As mentioned before, Sam has Pure-O. Her obsessive thought process is illustrated from the beginning of the text in a scene where she is afraid to use scissors while with her friends:

> If I cut it once, I'll keep going. I know I will. I'll move on to the next rose, and the next one, and I'll keep cutting until there's nothing left but a huge pile of stems, leaves, and petals. After that, I'll massacre those syrupy sweet, carefully written notes. Every single one of them. *God that's so twisted*. Then I'll take the scissors to Olivia's ponytail and cut right through that hair tie. *Shit. New thought. New thought*. (p. 5)

Sam then excuses herself to go downstairs, where her mom helps her work through her "debilitating, uncontrollable thoughts" (p. 8). A person with observable compulsions might manage these thoughts with methods such as counting or tapping, but Sam just breathes through the thoughts with the support of her mom. From the beginning, Pure-O is depicted accurately, particularly through the use of italics to show the dissonance between her thoughts, a strategy also used in *Turtles All the Way Down*. However, this scene is the strongest example of Sam's thought patterns, and the italics used throughout the rest of the book represent thoughts that seem more relevant to general anxiety, such as being nervous to read a poem out loud to her peers, rather than to instances relevant to OCD. Additionally, Sam's fixation on the number three sometimes manifests physically, such as when she drives until her odometer lands on a mileage ending in three, which challenges the Pure-O diagnosis.

One reason the book may have less of an emphasis on Pure-O-related thought patterns is because of the narrative's focus on Caroline. When Sam realizes that Caroline is a delusion, her therapist recognizes that this is not "consistent with OCD," but isn't sure what the cause is (p. 297). By the end of the novel, Sam grasps that she does not need Caroline anymore and is able to "let her go." While people can certainly have co-occurring disorders, psychosis itself is not related to OCD, and readers may not understand this distinction. The therapist does acknowledge that the manifestation of Caroline is inconsistent with OCD, but her observation may be insufficient for readers, considering the fact that this trend to pair these disorders occurs elsewhere. Two other books, McGovern's (2014) *Say What You Will* and Silvera's (2017) *History Is All You Left Me,* both feature protagonists with OCD who also experience hallucinations and delusions. Of these books, Silvera's is the only one to include a diagnosis of delusional disorder separate from OCD. Overall, *Every Last Word* is useful in its depiction of Pure-O, a rarer type of OCD many may be unfamiliar with, but it is lacking in its cohesiveness throughout the book, and the emphasis on Caroline may confuse readers about what OCD really is.

Patrick Ness's *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* (2015) does not depict the thought process of OCD quite as well, but it does an excellent job of showing the experience of compulsions. In one scene, Mikey is in his friend Jared's bathroom, washing his face. Each time, he feels like he has not done it "right" and needs to repeat his process:

> The eighth time through, I try to force my hands to rest on the sink and fail. I know how crazy this is. I know the feeling that I haven't washed my face "right" makes no sense. But like I said, knowing doesn't make it better. It makes it so much worse. How can I explain it? If you don't know, maybe I can't, but as I wash my face yet again, I hate myself so much I want to stick a knife in my heart. (p. 118)

Mikey is only able to stop washing his face when he is interrupted by Jared, who is aware of his OCD and helps him pause and put moisturizer on his face to aid his dry, cracked skin. One of the common misconceptions about OCD is that it is caused by a lack of willpower. As the organization BeyondOCD (2018) acknowledges, many people might yell at a person going through a compulsion to stop without understanding that people with OCD rarely can stop by themselves. The examples of Mikey's compulsions throughout the book illustrate how Mikey wishes he could stop but is unable to. These scenes may help readers without OCD become more empathetic to what a person with OCD goes through, understanding that it is not simply an issue of resolve. Of course, it is important to note that it is sometimes unclear where Mikey's compulsions come from. For people with OCD, compulsions are usually a way of managing an obsessive thought: by doing X, Z won't occur. Mikey's compulsions come from his anxiety about not being a good friend, but the reader has to pay close attention to these scenes to understand the connection.

John Green's (2017) *Turtles All the Way Down* does a good job of illustrating both obsessive thought spirals and compulsions throughout the book. In the narration of an extensive thought spiral, Aza fights against her compulsions to manage anxiety about getting a disease called C. Diff while staying in the hospital after a car crash. The internal dialogue illustrates the fight between her "rational" mind and her "obsessive" mind as she tries to resist drinking hand sanitizer:

> Please let me go. I'll do anything. I'll stand down. You can have this body. I don't want it anymore. *You will stand up*. I will not. I am my way not my will. *You will stand up*. Please. *You will go to the hand sanitizer*. Cogito, ergo non sum. Sweating *you already have it* nothing hurts like this *you've already got it* stop please God stop *you'll never be free of this* you'll never be free of this *you'll never get your self back* you'll never get your self back *do you want to die of this* do you want to die of this *because you will* you will *you will* you will *you will* you will. (pp. 228–229)

In this desperate moment, Aza is unable to resist her compulsion, squirting hand sanitizer in her mouth despite her logical mind knowing that it is more damaging than helpful. Her mom catches her and asks what she is doing, but she thinks: "I was so fucking embarrassed, but I did it again, because I had to

[. . .] I took a third shot of the foam and stuffed it into my mouth, gagging" (p. 229).

Aza thinks of herself as a demon, and the narrative shifts to the next morning where Aza wakes up wondering, "*Is it over?*" (p. 230). She discovers that she still feels the need to enact her compulsions, but the hand sanitizer has been removed from her hospital room. This scene not only illustrates the insidious, uncontrollable nature of both obsessions and compulsions, but it shows how they cannot simply be overcome once one hits rock bottom, which will be explored further in my discussion of the myth of a cure.

> **These scenes may help readers without OCD become more empathetic to what a person with OCD goes through, understanding that it is not simply an issue of resolve.**

The Supercrip

One of the most common literary devices in narratives featuring disabled characters is a supercrip framing. The supercrip is an example of how one's disability gives that person a special skill, compensating for the difficulties the person may have. Schalk (2016) writes:

> Almost all discussions of supercrips focus on how these representations rely on concepts of overcoming, heroism, inspiration, and the extraordinary. Additionally, most scholarship also mentions how these representations focus on individual attitude, work, and perseverance rather than on social barriers, making it seem as if all effects of disability can be erased if one merely works hard enough. (p. 73)

Dolmage (2014) also acknowledges that the refocused attention on the special skill "works as a management of the fears of the temporarily able-bodied (if and when I become disabled, I will compensate or overcome), and it acts as a demand placed upon disabled bodies (you had better be very good at something)" (as cited in Dunn, 2015, p. 120). Such attitudes may not seem like prejudices due to their positive spin, but they actually are. Dunn (2015) carefully examines the supercrip in its relationship to disabling characters, arguing that it is difficult to navigate the fine line "between harmful 'supercrip' stereotypes and more modest talents or intellectual habits developed by the

disabled characters in these novels" (p. 120). While there will not always be a definitive answer regarding what is problematic and what is not, navigating these novels through the lens of the supercrip can help readers analyze how a book contributes to disability stereotypes. One common supercrip trope for characters with OCD is that of the "superior detective." *Every Last Word* neither supports nor upends supercrip narratives in its plot, but *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* and *Turtles All the Way Down* both do work that challenges assumptions that people with OCD are particularly focused and skilled.

> **The juxtaposition of his strengths and his imperfections not only realistically represents what a person with OCD might be like, but realistically represents any young adult.**

The Rest of Us Just Live Here engages with the young adult dystopian/fantasy genre in which a person or group of teenagers work together to defeat a supernatural force. Mikey and his friends are not part of the "indie kids," a group with "unusual names and capital-D Destinies" (p. 26). Instead, they are students in the town being affected by the supernatural, but they do not know what is going on and do not try to solve the mystery. Mikey admits that he will never be the "Chosen One," but that is acceptable to him:

> Me, all I want to do is graduate. And have a last summer with my friends. And go away to college. And (more than) kiss Henna (more than) once. And then get on with finding out about the rest of my life. (p. 26)

Importantly, Mikey gets what he wants. He does not get wrapped up in the mystery; instead, he follows advice from the indie kid who runs through the graduation ceremony warning everyone to evacuate the building, and he watches his school explode from the sidelines. Mikey has strengths: he is a good friend and an extraordinary brother. He works hard and cares about those around him, and he sometimes feels like he is not enough. Readers know that he is a good person without him having to be the town hero. The juxtaposition of his strengths and his imperfections not only realistically represents what a person with

OCD might be like, but realistically represents any young adult.

Turtles All the Way Down is more obvious in how it challenges the supercrip narrative. Aza and Daisy become a detective duo as they try to locate Davis's missing father. While Aza finds the promised reward money exciting, she gets different benefits from helping Daisy. As she recollects playing with Davis when they were children, she thinks, "I was so good at being a kid, and so terrible at being whatever I was now" (Green, 2017, p. 25). Aza feels like her life is out of control because of her OCD, and she is sometimes even unsure if she can call her life her own when her thoughts control her. By helping Daisy, Aza is trying to illustrate that she is good at something: being a detective. From the very first line of the book, Aza questions her personhood, recollecting this story as "the time [she] first realized [she] might be fictional" (p. 2). She feels like "the canvas" (as opposed to the painter), "the sidekick," "the somebody's something" (pp. 2–3). Solving "The Case of the Fugitive Billionaire" with Daisy gives Aza an opportunity to see herself in a different way, as someone with agency and talent. In fact, she is the one who figures out the first "clue" that initiates this adventure.

Aza's connection to these detective stories and her internalization of such narratives are both evident within the story. The most obvious example, of course, is her last name: Holmes. An additional association is her obsession with her car, linking her to famous female teenage detective Nancy Drew. However, unlike previous "disabled yet skilled" detectives, Aza's OCD is more of a hindrance to her than a help. She wants to be a good detective, but she struggles more than she succeeds, separating her from the detectives to whom she is linked. Her nickname, "Holme*sy*," suggests a connection to Sherlock Holmes that is not quite there. In a climactic scene of the novel, she crashes the beloved car that connects her to Nancy Drew. Most significantly, Aza recognizes her "shortcomings" herself:

> You hear a lot about the benefits of insanity or whatever—[but] madness, in my admittedly limited experience, is accompanied by no superpowers; being mentally unwell doesn't make you loftily intelligent any more than having the flu does. So I know I should've been a brilliant detective or whatever, but in actuality I was one of the least observant people I'd ever met. (pp. 132–133)

Her OCD does not help her. Instead, it negatively impacts nearly all aspects of her life, including her relationships. The fight in which Daisy yells at Aza for her inattentiveness to Daisy's life results in the car crash. Aza justifiably feels that Daisy does not understand what it is like to have OCD, but she still feels bad for how her best friend feels. She feels unobservant in regard to the case and to her loved ones. Aza and Daisy do end up solving the case, but by accident. This accident shows that Aza's detective skills only work when she is managing her OCD with treatment; for her, this is a combination of medication, therapy, and care. She prioritizes her friendships, and Daisy and Aza solve the case together when they visit Mychal's art show at Pogue's Run, an underground tunnel. They connect the dots and realize that Davis's father's body is down there. Instead of calling the police, Aza decides to tell Davis and gives him agency in making a decision about what to do. Significantly, she notes that "you'd think solving mysteries would bring you closure, that closing the loop would comfort and quiet your mind. But it never does. The truth always disappoints" (p. 267). Her OCD does not make her a better detective, and solving the mystery does not cure her of her OCD.

The Myth of a Cure

Disability studies is, at its core, a challenge to the pervasive medical model of disability. Kafer (2013), a disabled person herself, reflects on the problems of this perspective:

> [T]he medical model of disability frames atypical bodies and minds as deviant, pathological, and defective, best understood and addressed in medical terms. In this framework, the proper approach to disability is to "treat" the condition and the person with the condition rather than "treating" the social processes and policies that constrict disabled people's lives. (p. 5)

She also considers the imagined future projected onto her: "Although I may believe I am leading an engaging and satisfying life, they can clearly see the grim future that awaits me: with no hope of a cure in sight, my future cannot be anything but bleak" (p. 2). Kafer's disability is physical. She is in a wheelchair, and there is currently no "cure" for her condition. For the protagonists of these books, the disability is mental and mostly invisible, with the exception of physical or verbal compulsions that can be seen by others. Like Kafer's disability, OCD does not have a cure either,

although it can be managed through a combination of medication and therapy. However, the narrative of mental illness does not allow for the impossibility of cure. It assumes that mental illness needs to be overcome, that it is a challenge. While many of the narratives featuring OCD do not end with an obvious cure, they do often end with a diagnosis, which the narrators think will solve their problems. Because the narrators in these three novels have been diagnosed before the book's beginning, these texts illustrate how the disability myth of a cure can be challenged.

Unfortunately, *Every Last Word* does little to challenge this myth. While Sam is not explicitly cured of her OCD by the end of the novel, she is able to stop her delusion of Caroline. Moreover, readers can infer that Sam is doing better and is possibly even unaffected by her Pure-O due to her budding romantic relationship with AJ. In Sam's final appointment with Sue, her therapist, Sue recognizes that Sam looks relaxed and happy. Sam admits that she feels this way and believes these feelings will be sustained. When she leaves the appointment with AJ, she thinks: "I reach out to press the elevator button. Once. I feel the urge to push it two more times, but I grab AJ's hand and kiss it instead" (p. 352). The book does not explicitly state that Sam has been cured, but it does suggest that she no longer has to deal with OCD or her delusion. More important, it does nothing to suggest that while she may be doing well now, her future self may have a difficult time again, which is common for people with a variety of mental illnesses.

This notion of a cure is also explored in *The Rest of Us Just Live Here*. Throughout the course of the novel, Mikey's compulsions worsen and he becomes suicidal. After a particularly difficult encounter with his alcoholic father, Mikey ignores his boss at work and thinks: "I'm too busy repeatedly counting ketchup bottles and wishing I was dead, wishing I was dead, wishing I was dead, wishing I was dead" (p. 223). Shortly after, an entire chapter is dedicated to Mikey's

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therapy session with Dr. Luther, during which Mikey reveals that he would kill himself if he ever found himself stuck in a loop he was unable to escape. The nine pages following this revelation focus solely on Mikey and Dr. Luther's conversation, concluding with Dr. Luther offering this insight:

> One, your anxiety is a genuine and very painful problem, not one you're making up. Two, you're not morally responsible for causing it. It's nothing you did or failed to do that makes it happen. Three, medication will help treat it, so that four, you and I can talk about ways to help make life bearable, even livable. (p. 239)

Dr. Luther ends the session by allowing Mikey to have agency in making choices moving forward. His acknowledgement of Mikey's suffering and willingness to help him manage his symptoms (rather than completely cure them) arguably affects Mikey's acceptance of mental illness as part of his identity. At the end of the novel, Mikey's friend Jared gains the supernatural ability to heal anyone completely, but Mikey rejects his offer to rid him of his OCD, saying: "If you heal all that stuff, I'll live the rest of my life not knowing if I could have figured it out on my own" (p. 315). The speculative nature of this book allows cure to be a tangible possibility, but Mikey still rejects it with the caveat that he would reconsider if he ever becomes suicidal again. His acceptance of OCD as part of his identity clearly challenges the medical model.

Turtles All the Way Down disrupts this myth through its conclusion, which is not a traditional happy ending. While Aza gets help, the time jump illustrates that she is not cured of her OCD. She tells Daisy, "The problem with happy endings [. . .] is that they're either not really happy, or not really endings, you know? In real life, some things get better and some things get worse. And then eventually you die" (p. 276). Aza recognizes that she does not have

a happy ending, but she finds comfort in her recognition of her future as an unpredictable rollercoaster of ups and downs. She is able to position herself near those she loves, and the time jump at the end of the novel affirms that she will not be alone in her future; she recognizes that she "would go on, that she would grow up, have children and love them, that despite loving them she would get too sick to care for them, be hospitalized, get better, and then get sick again" (p. 285). Her future is realistic, doing justice to the lives of people who live with mental illness.

Pedagogical Implications

As mentioned earlier, these three books are popular as indicated by their Goodreads reviews. It is unclear whether all of these ratings come from teenagers, but it can be assumed that this reading is happening independently, outside of classroom walls. More can be accomplished with these books if teachers include them in curricula. When educators discuss these books with their students, the texts themselves are not necessarily as significant as the questions they raise and the discussions they prompt. Ideally, teachers would be able to pair two texts side-by-side to avoid telling a single story (Adichie, 2009). I recommend a unit where students read either *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* or *Turtles All the Way Down* alongside excerpts from *Every Last Word*, such as the prologue, scenes between Sam and her therapist, and the conclusion where Caroline is revealed to be a delusion.

Asking critical questions can help teachers and their students think carefully about these books, possibly getting students to a place of resistance as they recognize hidden, harmful assumptions about OCD—not only in the texts themselves, but in the world around them.[2] In addition to Dunn's (2015) suggested questions discussed earlier, I would urge educators to think about such questions as: How does this literature impact how we understand the world and our perspectives regarding people with mental illness and/or OCD? What can we do with what we have learned? What impact can we make? What might still be missing from our understanding? What can be done to fill these gaps of knowledge? As they lead class discussions, teachers should remember that it is likely that they have students with invisible disabilities, which may be disclosed in the conversations. These per-

spectives should be welcomed, but teachers should also make sure that the room is a safe space for these students, regardless of disclosure.

In their discussions, students could also focus on the authorship of these texts and the resulting implications. Ness and Green both have OCD and have spoken about their experiences, which gives them a more personal perspective, while Stone was inspired by the diagnosis of a family friend's daughter. Students can consider questions such as: Who should write books about OCD? Are books about disability by non-disabled people inherently problematic? Who is the implied audience of the text: disabled or non-disabled readers? Additionally, students can think around the stereotype that links madness with creativity: does the fact that the best representations of OCD come from people with this disorder affirm this idea? Does John Green or Patrick Ness challenge this stereotype in any way?[3] Students can extend this discussion to think about themselves as critical readers. If they are not disabled, what authority do they have when analyzing these texts? These questions may be difficult for students because there is arguably no right answer, but they foster important critical thinking skills that students can apply elsewhere in their lives.

In addition to discussion, students can work on projects where they research another mental illness of their choice and analyze its depiction in popular culture. With their knowledge, they can create advocacy projects, such as a YouTube video or a poster campaign, that work to reframe their subject in a realistic and humanizing manner.

Responsible questions, discussions, and advocacy projects can help do the work that Dunn calls for in hoping that issues raised through these analyses will enable readers to "begin to imagine—and help build—a different world view" (p. 12). OCD is not an adjective, and people with OCD are more than their diagnosis. Critically analyzing responsibly written stories about living with OCD in classrooms not only clarifies harmful misconceptions about OCD, it can also help reduce harmful stigmas surrounding mental illness in general.

Endnotes

1. I place "cause" and "treated" in quotes because I recognize that these terms correlate more with the medical model of disability than the social model. However, for the purposes of my study, I was interested to see how books took up these common concepts in regard to mental illness.

2. Other resources I recommend that can help students think critically are 1) Season 3, Episode 9, "Mr. Monk Takes His Medicine," of the TV show *Monk*, which illustrates some additional problematic tropes, and 2) the International OCD Foundation's blog, which includes stories by people who have OCD that can help students think about how tropes impact real people.

3. John Green has argued that his mental illness inhibits his creative writing and that he does his best work when he considers himself well (thesoundandthefury, 2017, n.p.).

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Brandon L. **Sams** and Mike P. **Cook**

Living Well, Dying Well:

Engaging Students in Mindful Inquiry through *The Last Summer of the Death Warriors*

Anyone can be a Death Warrior, not just someone who is terminally ill. We are all terminally ill. A Death Warrior accepts death and makes a commitment to live a certain way, whether it be for one year or thirty years.
—*The Last Summer of the Death Warriors*

I've been thinking about the collection of human truths that our society most strongly resists acknowledging—things like disability, disease, aging, death. What does it say about who we are and what we are afraid of? What does it say about what unexplored opportunities there might be for truth-telling and liberating wisdom?
—*Courtney Martin, "The Courage to Acknowledge Our Frailty"*

Teachers are asked to do impossible things on a daily basis: to create meaningful and rewarding learning experiences for all students; to prepare students for work and college; to be compassionate and understanding; to be of upstanding moral character; to prepare students for standardized tests; to develop themselves professionally; to teach and have important conversations about the enduring themes of human life. And that's a partial list. Given increasing professional obligations, both procedural and ethical, a curious absence in curricula and classrooms is explicit conversation and focused teaching around death and dying. Imaginative literature—both canonical and young adult—is replete with death. And so are our lives. As a topic of inquiry, it remains largely missing in our classrooms, or perhaps worse, avoided completely as a topic too difficult and controversial to address.

A central and often broadcast promise of humanistic inquiry is to deliberate with others what it means to live well. *The Last Summer of the Death Warriors*, by Francisco X. Stork (2010), provocatively shifts the frame and asks, "What does it mean to die

well?" Stork's novel draws our attention to the process of dying, rather than death per se. What does dying well do for the dying and the living? How are those who live impacted by and connected to dying and the dead? Using *Death Warriors* as the fulcrum text, this article outlines an instructional unit for ninth graders that focuses on the ways that *dying*—the process of dying—is full of potential in the way it invites us to live intentionally, to reflect, to reconcile, to care and be cared for. We selected ninth grade because we imagine such a unit having an important influence on students during the whole of their secondary school experience. We believe our emphases on processes related to literacy and life can influence students' academic and out-of-school lives. In short, we imagine this unit affecting the intensity and intentionality with which students read, write, and live.

Based on our own secondary teaching experiences, ninth grade is an opportune and sensible time to begin this foundational work. We highlight how learning to die well can, paradoxically, teach us how to live well. To parallel our conviction that this process is full of learning potential, we imagine our unit helping

students, through direct engagement and reflection, experience the benefit of authentic inquiry and taking processes seriously as students and human beings. We offer readers a theoretically grounded and descriptive teaching unit outline with resources and approaches for teaching *Death Warriors* and, more generally, about death, dying, and mindful living. We describe how one such *Death Warriors* unit might begin, generate momentum, and conclude. Readers will learn about texts and resources in ways they can adapt to fit the needs of their teaching contexts.

> **To parallel our conviction that this process is full of learning potential, we imagine our unit helping students, through direct engagement and reflection, experience the benefit of authentic inquiry and taking processes seriously as students and human beings.**

We approach our unit from a comparative perspective—one of mindfulness and contemplation influenced by Eastern philosophical traditions. Incorporating meditation and reflective writing, our approach provides 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. Stork's novel introduces readers to the complexities of life, death, and dying through two characters, Pancho and DQ. Death has taken Pancho's entire family—his mother, father, and murdered sister. The novel begins with and is propelled by Pancho's vow to find and kill his sister's murderer. DQ, meanwhile, is slowly dying of cancer but wants to live on his terms, not those set by doctors or his mother. The young men connect at St. Anthony's home, where Pancho is charged with caring for DQ, a role he begrudgingly accepts. While living his final days, DQ begins to write the *Death Warrior Manifesto*, a guidebook to mindful living. Because of DQ's friendship, including the numerous conversations he has with DQ about living intentionally and compassionately, Pancho chooses to honor his sister's death by living his life and not pursuing revenge. DQ honors himself by living his final days in peace at St. Anthony's home instead of pursuing further cancer treatment.

Our work suggests approaches for establishing a contemplative, Eastern-influenced perspective on death and dying by incorporating meditation and contemplative writing practice. We also offer examples of supplementary texts to include alongside *Death Warriors*, providing detail about when and how they might be used in an instructional sequence. Finally, we offer examples of projects where students can apply their knowledge, skills, and understandings in authentic ways. Taking a lesson from DQ's orientation to death and dying, we intend our focus to provoke conversations with students about how we might live more intentionally with ourselves, with those we care about, and with those who care for us. Prior to a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of our unit, we feel it is important to provide a rationale for our choice to position death as a classroom-worthy, indeed vital, topic of inquiry.

Why Death?

While death and dying are universal experiences, *how* we experience death and dying is culturally specific. Notions of appropriate grief and mourning rituals, questions of what happens after death, and the meaning of life itself vary greatly. Cacciatore (2009), for example, argued that while the experience of death is common to all cultures, there is little research on the effects of culture on how individuals and families understand, confront, and reflect on death. The rituals surrounding death and the ways grief is expressed can be quite different. Because our values and beliefs about death are part of our cultural identity, we should work to understand death as part of cultural competence (Galambos, 2003) and to provide support and opportunities to learn and question those cultural beliefs associated with death. Thus, it is important for humans (i.e., students) to develop the components of cultural competence related to dying and death (e.g., grief, mourning, ceremonies, and celebrations).

Regardless of who we are, death is an ongoing part of our lives. Because young adults can struggle developmentally to grasp the value of their lives and their cultural relationship(s) to life and death, they need opportunities to consider how conceptions of death influence how they live, the ways they mourn,

and the rituals in which they engage to cope (Gire, 2014). Research has shown that children, even those too young to verbally articulate it, are aware of and concerned about death, making it all the more important to provide students with the requisite skills and lenses—for thinking about and responding to those concerns, for interrogating cultural representations of death (e.g., in literature), and for understanding the factors that contribute to their own perceptions of death. To support this work, teachers need to provide students with opportunities to:

- question the social "norms" of death and dying;
- conduct cross-cultural analyses of the values and practices related to death;
- understand and respect cultural differences (and similarities) with regard to death; and
- rethink their own beliefs about death and life.

Young adult literature (YAL) provides students fertile ground on which to wrestle with and make sense of the world around them. Teaching YAL allows students to examine how other adolescents manage and resolve issues associated with fear, sadness, and death (Tu, 1999). Thus, YAL provides students a safe space to consider complex and troubling topics through a fictional lens, an often necessary precursor for meaningful self-reflection and critique of contemporary life. Reading YAL in classrooms can support students as they develop language for reflecting on death and the skills necessary for discussing death as a part of their lives.

We find Stork's novel a fitting conduit to explore these issues with students. One of the ways adolescents come to understand complicated topics and concepts, death included, is through literature. It is not news that literature—including literature for children and adolescents—can influence how we think and live. What adolescents read about death in literature could very well be the only guided opportunities they receive to consider death, their relationship to death, and their own beliefs and feelings about death. This becomes even more important when we consider the range of ways people and cultures view, react to, and position death. Engaging with and reflecting on death vicariously through literature is not simply a means for students to better understand their own beliefs about and responses to death, it also creates scaffolded opportunities to learn about life. While reading

YAL featuring death and dying, teachers can design instruction to support students as they ask important questions about death and culture:

- What cultural values related to death are expressed in this book?
- How do the positioning and valuing of death in this book align with and depart from my own beliefs and understandings?
- What cultural lens on death is provided throughout this text?

Below, we offer a discussion of the comparative views of death and dying included in the unit. These serve as our theoretical anchors and critical lenses through which students consider—through the readings and in their own lives—Western and Eastern views of death and dying and, by extension, of living.

Comparative Views of Death and Dying

To help students critically consider death through literature, we borrow from McGoldrick, Almedia, and Hines (1991), who, writing about social work professionals, suggested five questions to ask when working with families who have experienced death. For our purposes, those families become the characters in our readings. We have adjusted McGoldrick et al.'s questions to guide students as they engage with the unit texts and to serve as analytic lenses for reading and for their lives moving forward:

- What rituals related to dying and death are culturally prescribed?
- What are the culture's beliefs regarding what happens after death?
- What emotional expressions are considered culturally appropriate?
- What are the culture's gender expectations when dealing with death?
- What are the culture's social class expectations when dealing with death?
- Within the culture, are stigmas attached to specific types of death and/or are specific types of death regarded as especially traumatic?

To assist students as they consider how death is variously conceptualized across cultures, teachers can include curricula on comparative views of death and dying. While our unit does not include readings that

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specifically address Western and Eastern views of death and dying, we do provide a brief overview here, as these lenses connect strongly to and illuminate our featured text.

Western Views

How do Americans understand death and dying? It is important to read around this question to get a better understanding of how students think (or don't think) about death and dying in their everyday lives. According to contemporary anthropological accounts of death in American life, "modern Americans die *hard*," Lee (2009) writes. "We live longer thanks to new advances in modern medicine, but we die with less equanimity than our grandparents did" (p. 55). Death is increasingly characterized by sanitation, isolation, and avoidance. As a society, we are more concerned with curing than with caring (Verghese, 1994). Western societies, generally, keep death "invisible"—at once taboo, unnamable, but seemingly conquerable through technological invention (Palgi & Abramovitch, 1984). In their reading of *Death Warriors*, students might apply this Western lens to DQ and the push he receives from his mother to try new treatments and approaches, which ultimately places more focus on the avoidance of death than on intentional choices of how to live life.

> We . . . provide our students ongoing opportunities to engage in meditation and contemplative ways of thinking as we also instruct them how to use mindful reading and writing practices in their coursework and in their lives.

Eastern Views

In Eastern traditions, such as Buddhism, followers are encouraged to face the reality of death, to make death an ordinary part of life, and thus live with more intensity and awareness (Hạnh, 2002). In Tibetan Buddhism, the nine-round or nine-point meditation centers on becoming mindful of and aware of death. The meditation is organized around three "roots" and three "convictions" (Macdonald, 1984). The three roots are worded in the form of simple state-

ments: death is certain; the time of death is uncertain/ unknown; mental/spiritual development is the only helper at the time of death. Three "convictions" necessarily follow. Following the certainty of death, one "ripens [the] inner potential by cultivating positive mental qualities and abandoning disturbing mental qualities" (p. 69). Following the uncertainty of the time of death, one "ripens inner potential, without delay" (p. 71). Following the fact that nothing—relationships or possessions—can intervene in or stop the inevitability of death, one ripens "inner potential purely" without "attachment to worldly concerns" (p. 74). In general, the nine-point meditation encourages one to be mindful of death and to live with purpose; thus, an Eastern orientation nudges toward a more intentional life. While Western perspectives suggest that one must be self-aware in order to be aware of death (Palgi & Abramovitch, 1984), Eastern perspectives on death and dying reverse the order: one needs to become aware of death for any chance at self-awareness and development.

Eastern philosophies and approaches to death, dying, and living ultimately guide this unit and, through the unit readings, provide students a necessary lens for reflecting on and analyzing their perceptions of death. One way we advocate scaffolding this transition into new ways of thinking and living is through the implementation of contemplative practices in the classroom. Contemplative (and mindful) practices have received increased attention in US K–12 schools, as we see entire curricula devoted to secular and social approaches to living well. This new ideology or paradigm in education parallels the larger shift to promote healthy lifestyles through contemplative techniques (e.g., yoga and meditation). We, for example, provide our students ongoing opportunities to engage in meditation and contemplative ways of thinking as we also instruct them how to use mindful reading and writing practices in their coursework and in their lives. What follows is an overview of these contemplative practices and how we introduce and sustain them in the classroom. We want to note that we use contemplative practices, including meditation, in all of our courses and units of study, as well as in our personal lives. We do not recommend that teachers only include them sporadically, as this leads to a kind of cultural tourism that borders on theft. Instead, we recommend that teachers incorporate these practices

into their daily lives, courses, and units of study as a consistent routine.

A powerful practice for the ELA classroom, meditation plays an important role in any approach to mindfulness and contemplation and, for our purposes, to the study of death and dying. Because meditation is grounded in Eastern philosophies, practicing meditation can help students make connections between Eastern and Western ways of thinking and living. Similarly, meditation can become a new lens for students' examinations of self and heighten their inner awareness of life systems (e.g., breathing). These benefits can impact motivation, engagement, and cognitive and emotional presence.

To introduce students to meditation, especially in a room full of peers, we begin by guiding the process. We read scripts focusing on breathing (a vital component of meditation), and as students begin to feel more comfortable sitting in silence and focusing on their breathing, we introduce themed scripts that align with specific texts or conversations. An excerpt from one such script reads:

> Focus on your breathing and notice how the air flows in and out. Visualize your breath gently flowing in and out of your body. [Pause]. Observe how your breath continues to flow. Deeply. Calmly. [Pause]. Notice each stage of a breath. Notice the in breath, and the pause that follows. Notice the exhale, and the pause before inhaling another breath. [Pause]. Feel your chest and your abdomen rise and fall gently with each breath. As you inhale, focus. Exhale, and focus. Inhale. Exhale.

With time, we extend the script pauses, helping students build meditative endurance and focus. Eventually, we remove scripts entirely, allowing students to become their own meditation guides. While we would encourage teachers to select and write scripts they feel work best in their classrooms and with their students, we also note the benefit of resources. Two such resources include meditation scripts and information from Edutopia (https://goo.gl/BWtbRe) and Mind Space (meditationinschools.org), a research-based resource housed at Cambridge University. To help students reflect on their meditative experiences, we make writing a daily component of our contemplative practice. A meditation journal serves as a space for students to consider their new experiences, to imple-

ment writing as a part of their lives, and to reflect on their own connections to our readings.

Scholars across disciplines position mindfulness as an approach to disciplinary inquiry that emphasizes thoughtfulness, time, nonviolence, integrity, and reflection. Mindful inquiry, we believe, helps students engage more thoughtfully with unit texts, with the topic of death, and with their experience of living inside and outside the classroom. Part of a mindful inquiry approach is engaging with texts and our own thoughts at a measured pace (Tremmel, 2017). We recommend incorporating frequent journal writing to accompany the daily meditation for our unit. The prompts, largely open-ended in nature,

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ask students to consider what they are thinking and feeling post-meditation, how this stance relates to or conflicts with *Death Warriors*, and how their engagement with silence and slow thinking parallel DQ's journey to be(come) a Death Warrior. The content of specific writing prompts, of course, is at the teacher's discretion, but our general recommendation is to provide students space and time to process what they are learning about dying and, thus, living a meaningful life.

Analyzing Death through *The Last Summer of the Death Warriors*

Stork's (2010) novel serves as a unique site for examining death through multiple lenses and philosophies. The author does a masterful job of weaving together the lives of two characters who approach death differently—Pancho seeks revenge for a murdered family member, while DQ faces death by desiring a fulfilling life. With time, the divergent plots reconcile because of Pancho's friendship with DQ and transformed perspective. Because the characters approach

death and dying in different ways—approaches that parallel Western and Eastern philosophies—*Death Warriors* fosters potentially fruitful discussions about the meaning of life, the destruction of anger, and the gift of friendship. Throughout much of the novel, for example, DQ lives his life in a way that closely aligns with Eastern beliefs. He composes his understanding of the relationship between life and death and his philosophy of living within his opus, the *Death Warrior Manifesto*, a text that serves as a powerful prompt for reflection: "Anyone can be a Death Warrior, not just someone who is terminally ill. We are all terminally ill. A Death Warrior accepts death and makes a commitment to live a certain way, whether it be for one year or thirty years" (p. 195). DQ's manifesto, readers are led to believe, is left unfinished—which offers teachers and students unique writing and assessment opportunities, which we later explore.

In contrast to DQ, Pancho spends much of his time angry and uses the clear dividing line he sees between life and death as a catalyst for his actions. It is not until he has spent significant time with DQ that he begins to think differently about the quality of his daily life, including its emotional tenor. He eventually gives up on his agenda of seeking revenge for his sister's death, due, in part, to DQ's modeling a different way to live. Pancho's character, particularly the gradual healing he experiences, offers students opportunities to reflect on how anger can protect but also empty the soul. Early in the novel, Pancho lives to be angry. By the end, we see his transformation into a sensitive, love-seeking, and giving person. Pancho, in a sense, "completes" DQ's manifesto by living his life and choosing to love, reminding readers that a life philosophy is only on paper, but a life well-lived must be in the flesh.

> In order to scaffold students' understanding of cross-cultural views of death, our unit features YAL, children's literature, and a variety of supplementary texts to assist students as they develop and reflect on their personal views regarding death and their emerging philosophies of life.

Also in contrast to DQ's approach to death, his mother Helen can be read as representing Western ideals, especially given her wealth and attempts to throw money at "a problem" (in this case, DQ's cancer). Instead of listening to her son and honoring his needs and wants, Helen obsesses over finding a cure. She is not entirely unsympathetic—who wouldn't want to try every available means of restoration?—but her efforts to cure affect the quality of DQ's final days. As students closely read this novel, McGoldrick's framework provides thoughtful reflection opportunities. For instance, posing the question, "What rituals related to dying and death are culturally prescribed?" points to the cultural conflict between DQ and his mother. He has gradually accepted that he will die and wants to spend his final days living with awareness and love. He is violating American cultural prescriptions about conquering death through cure—more medicine, more hospitals, more technology. The conflict between DQ and Helen gives students opportunities to question the death and dying rituals that compose American life.

Supplementary Texts

In order to scaffold students' understanding of cross-cultural views of death, our unit features YAL, children's literature, and a variety of supplementary texts to assist students as they develop and reflect on their personal views regarding death and their emerging philosophies of life. Below, we provide a list of multiple texts and text types that teachers can use to create a comprehensive unit plan. While providing a detailed step-by-step discussion of how to weave each text into an instructional unit is outside the scope of this article, we do offer brief examples of how specific texts potentially fit within a unit and connect with the anchor text.

Rather than reading *Death Warriors* (or any novel) in isolation, we argue for pairing it with excerpts from a range of supplementary texts. These other texts could possibly include additional YA novels, such as Matt de la Peña's *We Were Here* (2009) and *I Will Save You* (2010); traditional canonical texts, such as Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and Agee's *A Death in the Family* (1957); short stories, comics, and graphic novels, including Moon and Ba's *Daytripper* (2011) and the webcomic *MaryDeath* (Tarpley, 2018).

We also recommend incorporating informational or nonfiction texts (e.g., excerpts from Rhodes & Yedder's *Introduction to Thanatology: Death and Dying in American Society* [1983]; Peter Saul's TED Talk, "Let's Talk about Dying" [2011]; Roland Barthes's *Mourning Diary* [2010]), poetry (e.g., Neruda's "Nothing but Death" [1993]; Brontë's "On the Death of Anne Brontë" [1849]; and Howe's "What the Living Do" [1997]), music (e.g., Bob Dylan's "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" [1973]; Queen's "The Show Must Go On" [1990, track 12]; and Tupac Shakur's "Life Goes On" [1996, track 9]), and film (e.g., documentaries, such as Steve James's *Life Itself* [2015]). Using a wide variety of texts can remind students that the topic of death is approached by artists, intellectuals, humorists, and journalists—and that they are not alone in reflecting on the end of life and, more immediately, the purpose of living.

Below, we provide more detail about four supplementary texts and how they can be incorporated into an instructional unit on *Death Warriors*. Reading a webcomic such as *MaryDeath*, a story about an inquisitive girl (Mary) and her best friend (Death) who is only visible to her, takes some of the power away from death and helps students rethink the negative connotations associated with death using some of the tenets of Eastern approaches discussed earlier. One comic in particular nudges viewers to be more aware of the ever-presence of death where we might not see it. The comic, dated 11.23.17, shows Death dressed in a dark cape with scythe in hand, standing in a field of turkeys, all alive. The caption above the single panel reads "Happy Thanksgiving" in quotation marks. The dry, ironic humor points to the hypocrisy of the holiday, given the death and destruction that surround it (animals, factory farming, and settler colonialism). A second example critiques habits of mindlessness, connecting usefully to a discussion of *Death Warriors*. In a 2x2 paneled comic from 11.15.17, Death enters a teen's room, saying, "[I]t's time," matter-of-factly. The teen, in the middle of playing a computer game, responds with worry about whether his game character will die, too. Death, noticeably puzzled, responds that he does not think so. The teen, relieved, leaves the room with Death, noting that, "[H]e won't be totally gone . . . just afk [away from keyboard]."

Through this comic series, Tarpley personifies Death and positions the character as contributing to

Mary's identity development, highlighted by other briefly appearing characters and their seeming ignorance of death. What makes this narrative so interesting and aligns it clearly with our use of *Death Warriors* is how aware Mary appears to be that her death is inevitable, which leads her to question the purpose of life (a mindful approach to living and dying). Like DQ, Mary draws upon her knowledge and relationship to Death to navigate life in intentional ways. *MaryDeath* might be read on a daily basis during the *Death Warriors* unit, particularly at the beginning or end of class; or, if a teacher chooses, students could read the comic independently and brainstorm similarities and differences between *MaryDeath* and *Death Warriors*, including how *MaryDeath* offers a critique of our contemporary attitudes on death and dying.

To ease students into the topic of death, the unit can begin with a class discussion of *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952), a text with which many students will be familiar. *Charlotte's Web* raises questions about death obliquely, through the lives of animals, and gives students opportunities to consider death, suffering, and ethics. The opening scene in which the farmer is preparing to kill a piglet establishes death as a pending presence, making Wilbur's possible slaughter the central conflict. Thanks to Charlotte's writing of his attributes in her web, Wilbur becomes a prized (and spared) pig. As the novel continues, Wilbur watches his friend Charlotte throughout the process of her dying, and he uses that experience to grow, to strengthen, and to carry out her last wish. Using this novel as an introductory text can establish an important conversation around death and its role in Wilbur and Charlotte's friendship. Similarly, in *Death Warriors*, Pancho lives a parallel experience with DQ by ultimately recognizing the impact that DQ's living has on him and using that to reframe his entire being (i.e., to live as a Death Warrior).

> **We also encourage teachers to include multiple poems throughout this unit to provide students yet another way to consider death and to make connections to the anchor text and unit theme.**

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We also encourage teachers to include multiple poems throughout this unit to provide students yet another way to consider death and to make connections to the anchor text and unit theme. Marie Howe's poem, "What the Living Do" (1997), for example, illustrates the difficult process of living with tragedy. Howe wrote her poem in memory of her brother and, through the poem, comes to understand that "moving on" might mean not an easy or all-at-once forgetting,

but rather remembering the living in everyday moments.

Howe's poem connects to Pancho's strong emotions after the death of his sister and the spiritual journey he takes toward mindfulness. His ordinary work at the orphanage and hospital, including entertaining young children, becomes part of the daily life of re-centering himself in relationships, in the ordinary work of living. In the end, Pancho comes to realize that he is alive and that to continue living, he must move on. Howe's poem might be read near the beginning of the novel as a point of comparison to Pancho's or DQ's inner experience. An open invitation to respond to the poem in writing could feature in the students' journals after the daily meditation exercise. There are, of course, many possibilities for including Howe's poem and others like it. We think short, emotionally evocative poems would pair well with *Death Warriors* at numerous points in the storyline and could inspire deeply reflective writing by students on death and dying.

To help students engage in multimodal analyses of the meanings and representations of death, we bring in texts like Gabriel Bá and Fábio Moon's graphic novel *Daytripper*. The main character, Bras de Olivias Dominguez, works for a newspaper where he composes obituaries. The narrative is a series of his experiences dying vicariously through those he writes about. Through the graphic novel, students are privy to these vicarious deaths and are asked to

> **Through the graphic novel, students are privy to these vicarious deaths and are asked to reflect on the visual and textual representations of death and life, as well as the interconnectedness of the two.**

reflect on the visual and textual representations of death and life, as well as the interconnectedness of the two. *Daytripper* not only presents students with a unique way to consider death and the relationship(s) between death and life, the dead and the living, but fruitfully connects to Stork's novel. Just as Bras takes on the perspectives of the lives and deaths of those he is tasked with remembering through writing, *Death Warriors* provides readers a variety of perspectives of other characters (e.g., Pancho, DQ's mom) who watch DQ live his life and plan his death. *Daytripper* could be read before or after (or alongside) *Death Warriors*, allowing students to keep a parallel character journal where they note the similarities and differences between the instances of vicarious dying. Doing so requires that they make meaningful connections to the characters in ways that foster their own unique experiencing of characters' deaths. In other words, these texts position the students as those who vicariously experience death and dying.

Among other multimedia texts, we recommend including a variety of songs, Bob Dylan's "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," for example. Dylan acknowledges that death is inevitable and that he is beginning to think about how this impacts life. In this contemplation of death, Dylan makes explicit connections between death and life and uses that to reconsider how he might live. Through analyzing the lyrics, students are exposed to another approach to the relationship between life and death, to another way of embracing that inevitability. In essence, "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" is a manifesto in its own way, as Dylan wrestles with his own mortality and what that means for his life. While reading the anchor text, students can compare Dylan's frame of mind with DQ's decision to compose a Death Warrior manifesto and how he uses that composition to drive his daily living.

Summative Assessments

We have created a variety of assessment options for teachers that require students to apply the critical thinking and reflection skills they have learned in authentic ways. Some of these options—including the cemetery observation/reflection and funeral planning—may make teachers and students uncomfortable, and because of this possibility, we have included other projects. However, we do wonder whether any initial discomfort is, in fact, part of a larger problem

that this unit tries to expose and work through: the perception that the topic of death is unapproachable and inappropriate. We believe the projects require students to develop and extend their thinking about death and dying as a cultural and, ultimately, personal phenomena.

Two reflective writing prompts ask students to consider death as represented in related media or in their own community, to critically reflect on this representation compared to *Death Warriors*, and to apply these comparative analyses and reflections to their own life and developing life philosophies:

- Watch a TV program or movie (or read another YAL text) that deals with death. Discuss and critique the use of death and dying in this text. How does the text amplify, contradict, or otherwise complicate the themes of *Death Warriors?* What do you take away from this relationship and your analysis in terms of living your own life and living with those you care about?
- Spend time observing in a cemetery. Take notes of what you see, hear, feel, etc. Examine the symbols and representations of death and dying that you encounter. What do you notice? What do these symbols suggest about how we (as a culture) view and value death? What do they suggest about the dead and how we think about life and living? How does what you notice amplify, contradict, or otherwise complicate the themes of *Death Warriors?* What do your experiences observing, analyzing, and reflecting suggest to you about your own life?

The funeral planning and design assignment, described below, is meant to give students an authentic experience to help them think about what their life means and how they want to be remembered. We are convinced that our collective cultural and ritual practices give us an opportunity to reflect on the meaning we give our lives, and we approach the funeral planning assignment with this in mind. If teachers want to ask students to design DQ's funeral as a substitute, this is a sensible alternative that extends textual analysis. This assignment builds on the meditation and reflective writing students have completed throughout the unit. If teachers have asked students to compose part of their own Death Warrior manifesto, paralleling DQ's journey, that reflective work would connect to this culminating task as well:

- As a culminating project, you will plan your own funeral. Your planning may include writing an obituary or eulogy, composing the service itself (including music, literary or sacred readings, and related elements), and designing other elements of your choosing that we will discuss in class. Ultimately, this is a chance for you to think about and provide detailed instructions for how you would like your body cared for and how you would like your life to be remembered.

Note: Students will also reflect in writing about what they have learned about life and living from engaging in this assignment. Teachers might wait until students have begun or nearly concluded the funeral design process before informing them of the reflection. This delay is to forestall students losing themselves in abstract philosophies about life and living and to focus on the concrete details. We trust that students will be able to reflect in authentic ways about living because of and during their engagement with the funeral details.

Conclusion

We often talk about preparing students for the 21st century, while we do not talk enough about preparing them to live meaningfully with their families and communities—and their own selves. Teaching about death and dying in thoughtful ways can support our students as they develop self-awareness and meaningful perspectives on living well. Death is part of our lives, without exception, and invariably influences who we are and who we might become. As such, teaching about death and dying needs to be a part of culturally relevant and sustaining teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). *Death Warriors* offers students an Eastern-influenced lens for considering death and dying, an approach that might provide a counterweight to cultures of isolation and silence surrounding death, dying, and related issues. We have extended texts and thoughtful approaches for teachers to use when teaching death and dying in their classrooms. If our students are to live more mindfully and meaningfully and, by extension, if our societies are to be more open and honest about taboo topics—and learn from the exchange—then our classrooms are the important places where those conversations begin.

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Kathryn **Caprino** and Tara Anderson **Gold**

Examining Agency in Contemporary Young Adult Illness Narratives

Although we do not know the precise reason young adult (YA) shelves have been infected, Green's (2012) *The Fault in Our Stars* can be pinpointed as the origin of the growing genre of "sick lit" (Carey, 2013). We borrow the term *illness narratives* from the medical humanities, an interdisciplinary field that merges medicine and the humanities and is relatively unexplored in the secondary English classroom. The three *fictional* YA illness narratives in this article feature adolescents who exhibit agency as they voice and act on self-made decisions (Agency, 2014) and offer teachers and students opportunities to engage in a rhetorical analysis of agency within novels that debunk traditional presentations of adolescents with physical or mental illness as powerless.

We define the term *agency* as an adolescent's ability to gain knowledge or speak or act in a way that allows the young person to maintain a sense of humanity while occupying simultaneously what can be the dehumanizing role of patient. McGovern (*n.d.*) commented on how today's youth understand peers with disabilities: "Today's typically-developing kids are more aware of people with disabilities than their parents were, but they don't necessarily know them any better." Whereas we acknowledge there are various contexts in which adolescents with and without physical or mental illness exist within schools, we believe many students with mental or physical illness reside in the margins of today's classrooms. YA illness narratives present a counter-narrative to traditional depictions of mental and physical illness because they provide a voice to adolescent patients

who are not often heard or validated. Smagorinsky (2014) described mental illness as a "critical area of multicultural education" (p. 15), and while the characters we present here have mental and physical illness, we agree that opening students' perspectives to adolescents' experiences—both similar to and different from their own—can have powerful effects. In their presentations of adolescents who are more than ill bodies and minds, Shusterman's (2015) *Challenger Deep,* Thomas's (2015) *Because You'll Never Meet Me,* and Toten's (2015) *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B* showcase adolescents with agency, thus allowing students—both with and without a diagnosis—to gain empathy through discussions and activities that help them think critically about agency, both in YA illness narratives and in their lives.

Approaching our work through a critical literacy lens allowed us to emphasize the importance of having students interrogate the voices given or not given agency in these texts (Stevens & Bean, 2007). Analyzing why particular voices are foregrounded or not in YA illness narratives relates directly to the aims of critical literacy, which is "focused on the uses of literacy for social justice in marginalized and disenfranchised communities" (Luke, 2012, p. 5). Curwood (2013) suggested that YA literature that features "characters with disabilities . . . offers teachers the powerful opportunity to build students' critical literacy skills" (p. 18). As we share in our implications section, the YA illness narratives explored here provide opportunities for students to engage in Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys's (2002) four elements of critical

literacy: disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice.

Review of the Literature

Our work is informed by the literature on the medical humanities, illness narratives, and agency. As a broad field bringing together medical sciences and the humanities (Medical Humanities, 2004), the medical humanities has created a space for those experiencing illness to share their experiences via illness narratives. Resisting the dehumanization of the medical sciences (Crawford, Brown, Baker, Tischler, & Abrams, 2015), these counter-narratives allow patients to gain agency over their stories and, in some part, their illnesses. By shifting the language surrounding illness from sterile pathology to a rhetoric of agency that focuses on the stories and experiences of the whole person, illness narratives seek to shift power back to patients within the medical-industrial complex (Charon, 2006; Couser, 1997; Garden, 2015; Rinaldi, 1996).

> [T]he medical humanities has created a space for those experiencing illness to share their experiences via illness narratives.

The Medical Humanities

The medical humanities is an interdisciplinary field defined as "the study of the intersection of medicine and humanistic disciplines such as philosophy, religion, literature, and the fine and performing arts" (Medical Humanities, 2004). Greaves and Evans (2000) cited two aims for the medical humanities:

> The first is concerned with complementing medical science and technology through the contrasting perspective of the arts and humanities, but without either side impinging on the other. The second aims to refocus the whole of medicine in relation to an understanding of what it is to be fully human; the reuniting of technical and humanistic knowledge and practice is central to this enterprise. (p. 1)

As it resists the idea of the marginalized patient (Garden, 2015), the medical humanities focuses on humanizing patients and seeing them as people who are not defined solely by their diagnosis (Crawford et al., 2015).

Illness Narratives

Illness narratives, or "writing[s] about the episode of one's illness" (Couser, 1997, p. 6), epitomize the medical humanities. We might say that Virginia Woolf's (1930/2002) illness narrative, *On Being Ill*—in its lamentations about the lack of language about the body and its assertions that those who are ill are able to appreciate more acutely life's moments—was the precursor to today's illness narratives. Contemporary scholars have emphasized the move away from the depersonalization of patients (Hawkins, 1999) and toward acknowledgment of patients' voices in their care and the need for doctors to listen to patients' voices (Charon, 2006; Garden, 2015; Rinaldi, 1996). What health care professionals can gain from interpreting illness narratives is powerful (Charon, 2006; Kleinman, 1988) in that illness narratives provide spaces for patients to provide counter-narratives that "help us understand what it means to be some body" (Couser, 1997, p. 295). Kleinman (1988) explained that a clinician who knows a patient's story will be less likely to think of therapy for that person in a way that dehumanizes the patient and will be energized to care for the patient whom the clinician now identifies as a "moral agent" (p. 237). Those who write or have their illness narratives exposed become *people* rather than *patients* with a diagnosis.

Agency

As Defossez (2016) wrote, "There has been a surge of interest in, and respect for, 'patient agency' in public and professional discourses of health and medicine" (p. 2). *Agency* is a complex term with which rhetoricians have grappled for decades (Defossez, 2016). Popular in the late twentieth century, George Engle's idea of the biopsychosocial model of medical care in which "the doctor is working on a human, not merely a diseased body" (Stone, 1997, p. 204) seems particularly relevant to our discussion of agency because of its focus on the *human. Agency* has connections to patient control (Defossez, 2016; Stone, 1997), and we acknowledge scholars' ideas about whether patients can truly have agency. Exposing the ironies of three ways of examining patient agency (i.e., agency as the capacity to know, agency as the capacity to prevent,

and agency as the capacity to decide), Defossez (2016) wrote, "While the rhetorics of patient agency persuade us that we have ultimate control and responsibility over our bodies and health, at some point in our lives, the ultimate uncontrollability of our bodies will be made apparent to us" (p. 16). Whereas healthcare professionals may view agency in terms of compliance and transmitting knowledge, individuals with illnesses can develop knowledge in the context of what can be complicated and emotional medical journeys (Hunter, Franken, & Balmer, 2015). The rhetoric around patient knowledge holds both a resistance to the stance of patient-as-passive-individual (Defossez, 2016) and a recognition of medical professionals' power over patients even while giving appearances of patient agency.

Selection of Texts

Before deciding upon our three focal texts, we read several novels that fit within the current micro-trend of "sick lit": Vizzini's (2006) *It's Kind of a Funny Story,* Andrews's (2012) *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl,* Green's (2012) *The Fault in Our Stars,* Haydu's (2013) *OCD Love Story,* Scelsa's (2015) *Fans of the Impossible Life,* Shusterman's (2015) *Challenger Deep,* Thomas's (2015) *Because You'll Never Meet Me,* Toten's (2015) *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B,* and Yoon's (2015) *Everything, Everything.*

We wanted selection criteria that moved beyond the fact that these texts are popular with secondary students and are featured frequently on bookstore shelves and recommended reading lists. Books had to exemplify fictional illness narratives and provide students a lens into adolescents with physical or mental illnesses who exhibit agency. Because we also wanted to share with students books that experts deem quality texts, we decided to limit our texts to award-winning books published within a single year. With this in mind, we selected books published in the United States in 2015 that either won or were nominated for a prominent award.

Based on our criteria, we identified three focal texts: Shusterman's (2015) *Challenger Deep* was awarded the 2015 National Book Award for Young People's Literature and was named to the 2016 Library Services Association's Top Ten Best Fiction for Young

Adults list; Thomas's (2015) *Because You'll Never Meet Me* was a finalist for the 2016 William C. Morris Debut Award; and Toten's (2015) *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B* won the 2016 Schneider Family Book Award and the 2014 Ruth and Sylvia Schwartz Children's Book Award.

We originally identified two more books that did not make the final cut for our selection criteria after our initial reading. Although it reveals one of the main character's struggles with depression, *Fans of the Impossible Life* (Scelsa, 2015) did not earn a prominent award. And *Everything, Everything* (Yoon, 2015), a text that includes a diverse female protagonist (a feature we admired in the text), has an ending that prevents it from fitting into the category of an illness narrative. Though we acknowledge the lack of diversity in terms of protagonists and representations of diverse socioeconomic status and intersectional identities within the "sick lit" genre (something we recommend discussing with students in the Implications section), our focal texts were selected because they provide contemporary, fictional accounts of adolescents with physical and mental illnesses who exhibit agency. More information about the three focal texts, including how agency is explored within these texts, is shared in Table 1.

> Books had to exemplify fictional illness narratives and provide students a lens into adolescents with physical or mental illnesses who exhibit agency.

Methods

We drew on critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a tool for identifying ideologies of agency (Gee, 2014). CDA examines not only the use of language in text and the situated meaning of language but also how language is connected with social practices. According to Gee, critical approaches to discourse analysis "treat social practices, not just in terms of social relationships, but, also, in terms of their implications for things like status, solidarity, the distribution of social goods, and power" (p. 87). CDA underscores that language

Table 1. Texts that feature adolescents' illnesses

Author and Title	Type of Illness	Brief Synopsis	Elements of Agency
Neal Shusterman's (2015) *Challenger Deep*	schizophrenia	Caden, a teenager with schizophrenia, spends time in a mental health facility.	Caden's verbalization of illness through first-person narrative, protesting doctors' prescriptions, acute awareness of others' perceptions of him, his artwork
Leah Thomas's (2015) *Because You'll Never Meet Me*	electricity allergy, heart condition	Two boys—Ollie, who has an electricity allergy, and Moritz, who has a pacemaker—develop a deep bond via writing letters.	Moritz and Ollie's letters to each other, Moritz and Ollie's medical knowledge, Ollie's relationship with Liz
Teresa Toten's (2013) *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B*	obsessive-compulsive disorder	Adam, the son of divorcees, contemplates what it means to save oneself as part of a group for teenagers with obsessive-compulsive disorder.	Characters' relationships in group, Adam's infatuation with Robyn, Adam's superhero identity as Batman

both represents and reinforces power. One perspective within discourse analysis is the agent–patient distinction, or the distinction between "what is done *by* a person and what is done *to* a person" (Wood & Kroger, 2000). The YA illness narratives we have selected are particularly suited to this type of analysis because of what they reveal about patients with agency.

Using Glenn's (2008) and Curwood's (2013) critical discourse analysis of young adult novels as guides, we engaged in three levels of analysis. First, we read each book, focusing on the general plot, themes, and character development and whether the novels fit our criteria as illness narratives. Next, we both read all three books a second time, each of us coding separately for emergent themes related to agency. We both highlighted key passages in the novels and compiled these passages into lists based on potential themes. We then discussed, combined, and eliminated individual themes from our independent lists in order to come to a consensus on emergent themes based on relevance and prevalence across texts. A third and final reading was focused on finding textual evidence to support the identified themes.

Examining Patient Agency in Three Focal Texts

The adolescents in the focal texts we selected are not defined by their illness. When faced with dire deci-

sions, they make adult choices, and they gain agency as they take control over their particular circumstances. Several themes emerged from a rhetorical analysis of how agency functioned in YA texts: a clear personal articulation of illness, the positioning of patients as medical experts, and a privileging of illness management over romantic relationships.

Articulation of Illness

Across all three focal texts, adolescents living with illness demonstrate agency by describing their illness on their terms. In her piece "Welcome to Cancerland," Ehrenreich (2001) dismissed the overwhelmingly hopeful nature of cancer narratives and the pink-ribboned bears contained within. Noting that positivity might have a place in the cancer narrative, she commented, "Cheerfulness is more or less mandatory, dissent a kind of treason." What became clear as we explored the focal texts was the brutal honesty with which characters discuss their illnesses, even when these descriptions are not positive. All four characters struggle, on some level, with sharing the details of their complicated lives, but all eventually share these inner worlds with their peers, doctors, and the world at large.

One of the struggles Adam faces in *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B* is his weekly homework for his therapist. Each week he is supposed to keep a record of things he knows, as well as how his medications

are working. He writes four lists in the novel, and the reader follows his struggle—both to actually complete each list and to complete each list honestly. It is not until the last list, at the climax of the novel, that Adam recognizes the importance of this assignment and completes the list without cheating. Adam is candid with *himself* in the final list so that his therapist can truly help him. He accepts his need for medicine, as evidenced in these lines:

> Meds: Ativan (I need a new prescription)
> Anafranil 25 mg 3 x per day (need a new script there too) (p. 240).

In order for the treatments to work, Adam has to understand his agency to use tools available to him (including his medications, therapist, and support group) to manage his condition. His narrative exhibits how this process is neither easy nor immediate, but also how he comes to fully acknowledge his role in "getting fixed."

Because You'll Never Meet Me is an epistolary novel told through the letters of two boys with two different illnesses living on two different continents. The author's choice of style here is an important element in giving her characters voice to articulate their illnesses. These letters collectively become illness narratives as both boys pen their stories to each other, a point that Ollie addresses directly in his first letter to Moritz: "So these letters will be my autobiography" (p. 10). He explains to Moritz that these letters are not just friendly social conversations, but also a way for him to share his story with someone else who has experienced similar hardships.

In Ollie's first letter, he is careful to divulge the right details in the right order at the right time to craft the story he wants to tell. When he slips and hints at a detail that was out of place, he catches himself by saying, "I'll tell you about that later because Mom says that good autobiographies are linear, like life. Like, I should tell you about being a toddler before I talk about being a kid" (p. 10). Throughout all of their letters, both Ollie and Moritz describe their letters as each other's "story," though Ollie is initially more forthcoming in providing the details of his circumstances and emotions. Moritz does eventually begin to trust Ollie, writing, "Your honesty about your suffering—your confounded honesty!—has at last given me cause to share my own trials with you" (p. 246).

It is this trust and honesty through the written word that finally allow Ollie and Moritz to put together the puzzle of their lives, their illnesses, and how these intertwine. This is the discovery that gives both boys a full understanding about the causes of their conditions, giving them agency to take action.

In particular, both boys experience social isolation as a result of their respective conditions. Moritz, a German boy born without eyes, is particular about the language he uses to describe his physicality. In his first letter to Ollie, Moritz writes, "I was born without eyes. Do not ask if I am blind. I have never been blind. But I was born with no eyeballs in my sockets" (Thomas, 2015, p. 26). However, it is Moritz's descriptions of how he experiences the world and his articulation of his assets that give him power. For instance, he possesses a stellar sense of hearing: "I see with my ears. My brain uses sounds waves to determine the shapes of objects and barriers in my vicinity" (p. 28). He also shares his keen intellect with Ollie, but acknowledges the weakness of his heart and need for a pacemaker: "Of greater concern to me is the chronic weakness of my heart. But that is a story best left untold. Leave it be. Needling won't reveal it" (p. 29). Here, Moritz expresses frustration with the ways in which he is understood by his peers and teachers, particularly when they have essentialized him to his physical features: "In my absence, there'd been an assembly about bullying 'disabled' students. In my absence, I'd become a label" (p. 99). Through writing to Ollie and crafting his own narrative as he sees it, Moritz demonstrates agency, debunking misconceptions about his abilities while also acknowledging the social isolation he feels in a world that treats him differently.

In *Challenger Deep*, Caden draws abstract representations of the world inside of his head. While the other novels we studied use only language to communicate unique descriptions of illness, Caden's story

Through writing to Ollie . . . Moritz demonstrates agency, debunking misconceptions about his abilities while also acknowledging the social isolation he feels in a world that treats him differently.

uses the powerful combination of extended metaphors (e.g., serving the captain of the ship heading to the Mariana Trench) and chaotic images to add layers of meaning to the confusion of emergent schizophrenia. Here, Caden not only normalizes the complexities of a patient's brain, he also gains agency through making visible what is often not: his schizophrenia. Though these drawings ultimately help the reader see the invisible, their primary purpose is for Caden to make visible his own thoughts and better understand himself. In one scene, he writes, "These images have to mean something, don't they? Why else would they be so intense? Why would that silent voice inside be so adamant about getting them out?" (pp. 53–54). Caden's visual displays of what is happening in his mind permit him to articulate his illness on his terms and in his media, providing him agency.

> In our focal YA illness narratives, . . . adolescents who are ill become medical experts.

Patients as Medical Experts

Parents and teachers generally serve in positions of power in adolescents' lives. Doctors and other healthcare professionals can easily become another rung on the power ladder. In our focal YA illness narratives, however, adolescents who are ill become medical experts. We use the term *expert* here not to mean these adolescents are able to alter the course of their treatment or illnesses, but rather to mean that they gain a voice. The ways in which these characters critically consume medical literature or advice allow them to attain agency. This information consumption aligns with contemporary scholarship about patients accumulating medical knowledge via technology; Danholt, Piras, Storni and Zanutto (2013) name this tech-savvy patient *Patient 2.0.* Adolescents in the focal texts prove that the modern patient is knowledgeable about his or her medical care, even to the point of being able to play with medical professionals, and they use language to position themselves powerfully over medical professionals.

In their letters to each other in *Because You'll Never Meet Me,* Ollie and Moritz share medical knowledge with each other using technical medical jargon.

Both boys have spent a great deal of time alone and possess curious intellects, so their time spent with doctors sparks an interest in why their bodies are the way they are. Early in the novel, Ollie corrects Moritz's medical language and explains how he knows so much about the human body:

"Oh, and the name of your lower-left heart chamber is actually your left ventricle, or your *ventriculus cordis sinister*" (p. 21). *Because You'll Never Meet Me* is unique among the three focal novels in this study because Ollie and Moritz, through their collective sharing of their narratives and deductive reasoning, come to understand a mystery about their conditions that has been deliberately withheld from them by a man whom they discover is their mutual doctor: Dr. Auburn Stache/*Rostschnurrbart.* In this case, both the boys' parents and medical professionals deliberately withheld information about their medical pasts, and the boys learn new information about their conditions through their research and knowledge.

Challenger Deep's Caden is very observant of his surroundings when he is placed in a mental facility, and he is able, at times, to use his observational knowledge to subvert doctors' orders. Even though it is not necessarily to his benefit, we understand Caden's critique of the medical-industrial complex's concern with controlling his negative behaviors at the expense of his ability to feel emotions. Near the end of the novel, Caden has had enough of being treated as an experiment by his doctors and yells, "Adjust my medications, adjust my medications, that's all you ever want to do is adjust my medications!" (p. 248). He goes on to explain to his doctor that "[anger is] real, isn't it? It's *normal,* isn't it? Look at where I am and what's happened to me! I have a right to be angry!" (pp. 248–249). Caden does not take his group therapy seriously and outsmarts the nurses by tucking his medicines into his cheeks. Although these are negative behaviors that impede his progress, they are also ways for Caden to have control over this thoughts and body at a time when he feels he has lost control.

In *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B,* Adam uses medical knowledge to communicate with those who are and are not familiar with OCD. Although all of the teenagers in the group have the same diagnosis, Adam articulates the differences between teenagers with OCD: "Peter was going to be a problem. Or maybe he just needed a meds adjustment. With some in the

group it was hard to tell" (p. 4). Here Adam assumes the position of OCD expert, as he draws attention to the fact that one of his peers is in a worse state than he and needs desperately to be prescribed a different medication. Adam-as-pharmacist shows up at another point in the text when he talks to Thor: "I mean, meds and meds adjustments can mess you up almost as much as the OCD can" (p. 248). Adam's knowledge of the ways in which OCD and medication complement one another reveals a deep understanding of the mental illness and the effects of his treatment options. In another scene, Adam embodies the language of a medical expert when he introduces his group mates to a priest: "Oh yeah, OCD is the major presenting and we're all medicated and not violent" (p. 186). His language is similar to that which might appear on a patient's medical chart. Adam gains agency by engaging in the medical discourse surrounding OCD.

We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that this idea of patients as medical experts becomes complicated; in certain instances, the adolescents in these novels exemplify agency by acquiescing to the idea that medical help is needed and acknowledging the medical professionals' expertise. We encourage discussions about whether adolescents acting as medical experts always means pushing back against medical professionals.

Relationships

Relationships are typically a central focus in YA literature, as they are in the lives of adolescents in general. One characteristic of "sick lit" in the tradition of novels such as Green's (2012) *The Fault in Our Stars* is whirlwind teen romance against the backdrop of realized mortality. However, the three novels we read for this study do not consider terminal illness, but instead consider the stories of teens with chronic, and often invisible, illnesses that they must manage for the rest of their lives. Not surprisingly, these illnesses complicate the relationships the main characters have with parents, friends, and love interests. In fact, we noticed that the protagonists chose, albeit reluctantly, to prioritize management of their respective conditions over romantic relationships.

When Adam and Robyn first fall for each other in *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B*, Adam believes that he can be "fixed" (p. 228), and he uses Robyn as his motivation to dream up a version of himself that is

not plagued by anxious thoughts. Because of Robyn, he theorizes, "His life was going to be perfect—better than perfect. Adam was on his way straight to *superior*" (p. 69), and he repeatedly expresses hopeful motivation, such as, "I have to get better for Robyn" (p. 228). However, Adam comes to accept that he must prioritize himself when he and Robyn break up, knowing they are not good for each other while she is in remission and Adam's OCD is only getting worse. Robyn directly acknowledges that in a difficult conversation with Adam, stating, "You've got to let go of all those distractions, all those extra worries, and concentrate on yourself" (p. 251). Though this breakup is difficult for Adam and Robyn, Adam knows it is necessary for his long-term health. Adam and Robyn's love story does not become a clichéd teenage romance. Instead, it represents Adam's maturity and his desire to devote time to himself—an act of agency.

> [W]e noticed that the protagonists chose, albeit reluctantly, to prioritize management of their respective conditions over romantic relationships.

In *Challenger Deep,* Caden has a relationship with fellow patient Callie. This relationship is complicated and focuses significantly on the value of physical touch and human relationships in the sterile, controlled world of the hospital. Caden holds Callie's hand despite the rules against it: "Sometimes I hold her hand—which, strictly speaking, we're not supposed to do. No physical contact allowed" (p. 185). Caden notes that he does not care if the adults see him holding hands with Callie. In these scenes, we see how much Caden needs these humanizing moments. However, just as Adam and Robyn eventually realize the complicated nature of balancing love and mental health, Callie and Caden also realize that their relationship may be temporary. Callie says, "We have to promise to free each other when the time comes" (p. 215). Here, Callie reminds Caden that being "free" is a condition of their own making and not simply the whim of the medical professionals. While their doctor must "sign the papers," it is, ultimately, the patient's progress that determines release. Though Caden initially seems to miss Callie's point in the above con-

versation, he eventually realizes that setting her "free" means letting go of their relationship and focusing on getting better. These choices reflect the conflicts between two things Caden desires and the choice he must make to prioritize one over the other.

In *Because You'll Never Meet Me*, Ollie and Moritz discuss in their letters the anxieties of capturing the attention of girls they know, but it is Ollie's relationship with Liz that takes center stage. Liz is Ollie's neighbor and one of the few people with whom he can ever come in contact. Ollie struggles with the understanding that for someone to be in a relationship with him, she must give up going out in public together or participating in any activities that include electricity. Ollie is smitten by Liz: "It didn't matter the sky was dark outside, that we needed our four lanterns to see by. She was lighting up the room for me" (p. 111). His attraction to Liz humanizes him and helps him understand that he is more than a diagnosis. Liz tells Ollie that he should never mention his illness before mentioning his name. This language exemplifies how adolescents with mental or physical illness can gain agency through and because of their relationships. Liz and Ollie share a few kisses, even one that "didn't suck" (p. 339), and whereas their relationship does not develop into something lasting beyond the book's final pages, what Ollie learns about love and about himself through his relationship with Liz is powerful.

The realness of these teenagers' relationships resists some authors' well-intentioned decisions to allow teenagers with illnesses to engage in romantic relationships and friendships that are so unlike typical teenagers' somewhat tumultuous and dramatic relationships and friendships. The rawness of the relationships presented in the focal YA illness narratives allows the teenagers to exhibit agency and shows them as just teenagers, not teenagers with an illness.

> **The rawness of the relationships presented in the focal YA illness narratives allows the teenagers to exhibit agency and shows them as just teenagers, not teenagers with an illness.**

Implications for Classroom Practice

YA illness narratives provide spaces for rich rhetorical analysis, interdisciplinary discussions, and writing assignments that have the potential to help students develop literary and nonfiction analysis skills. The lesson ideas we share below align with several components of the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), including identifying key ideas and details, focusing on craft and structure, comparing and contrasting across multiple texts, examining nonfiction texts, and composing narratives. Below, we suggest classroom activity ideas to engage secondary English students in discussions about how agency functions within YA illness narratives and encourage teachers to collaborate with colleagues from different contents areas. Imagine how the literature and biology teacher and their students might approach these illness narratives in different ways. We acknowledge that some teachers may be hesitant to create new units of study for a variety of reasons; however, we encourage teachers to think about how the lesson ideas presented below may fit into existing curriculum units or guides on courage, family, friendship, hope, or injustice.

Fictional Illness Narratives versus Nonfiction Illness Narratives

Teachers might have their students compare and contrast a YA illness narrative with a nonfiction illness narrative. For example, one could pair:

- *Challenger Deep* with one of the stories from the World Fellowship for Schizophrenia and Allied Disorders (2009);
- *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B* with a post from author Jackie Lea Sommers's (*n.d.*) blog about her life as a published YA author and person with OCD;
- *Because You'll Never Meet Me* with Abby's story on the Pacemaker Club's website (Pacemaker Club Inc., 2017).

These pairings could encourage discussions around how agency functions similarly or differently within fiction and nonfiction texts. Such discussions might help students think about how what is going on in YA illness narratives relates to real people and health initiatives, providing an opportunity for teachers to

integrate several content areas. Table 2 provides print and media nonfiction pairings for each of the focal texts.

Analysis of Representations of Illness in Scientific Texts

Yet another way to encourage interdisciplinary work is to have students examine the ways in which illness is represented in YA illness narratives and nonfiction science texts. For example, students can engage in a critical analysis of how OCD is represented in *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B* and in an Anxiety and Depression Association of America's (ADAA, *n.d.*) brochure (https://www.adaa.org/sites/default/files/OCD_brochure_rev.2014.pdf). After reading both texts, students could work in small groups to discuss the following questions:

1. In what ways are people with OCD positioned in these texts? What similarities and differences do you notice? Provide textual evidence to support your thoughts.
2. In what ways do the texts provide or not provide agency to people with OCD?
3. What changes would you make to the texts to ensure that patients had agency? Provide textual evidence to support your thoughts.
4. Recreate the OCD brochure in a way that positions adolescents with OCD as people with agency. Be able to support your decisions with evidence from the original texts and explain how the authorial decisions you made address the agency of adolescents with OCD.

Relatedly, students could examine how agency in *Challenger Deep* is presented similarly to or differently from the schizophrenia entry in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (APA, *n.d.*). Analyzing fiction and nonfiction texts about depression can engage students in discussions about how agency functions in each of these pieces and prompt them to think about how the patient is treated in YA illness narratives versus scientific literature about particular illnesses.

Analysis of Agency via a Text Set

Although the previous two classroom ideas focused on having students compare one text to another, we also think it is valuable to have students analyze agency through a critical literacy lens across the multiple texts in a text set. The themes we shared above (i.e., how patients articulate their illness, how patients reveal medical expertise, and how patients engage in romantic relationships) and others that emerge in the classroom can be the catalyst for discussions of agency across multiple written or visual texts. Stevens and Bean's (2007) questions related to critical literacy can spark dialogue about agency: *Who/what is represented in this text? What is absent or not represented? For whom was this text written? How could this text be rewritten to convey a different idea/interpretation?*

Couser (1997) wrote about the lack of diversity in illness narratives, writing that nonfiction illness narratives are typically written by white, upper-class people who are already writers or professionals in fields in which writing is important. Students and teachers

Table 2. Fiction/nonfiction pairings for illness narratives

Fiction	Nonfiction	Multimedia
Shusterman's (2015) *Challenger Deep*	Personal stories (World Fellowship for Schizophrenia and Allied Disorders, 2009)	NPR podcast: "Would you tell the world you have schizophrenia on YouTube?" (Chen, 2016) Video: "First Person Experience: Laura" (Teen-MentalHealth.org, 2017)
Thomas's (2015) *Because You'll Never Meet Me*	Abby's story on the Pacemaker Club's website (Pacemaker Club Inc., 2017)	NPR podcast: "Headphones can disrupt implanted heart devices" (Shapiro, 2009)
Toten's (2015) *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B*	Website: "Jackie Lea Sommers" (Sommers, n.d.)	YouTube video: "The stereotypes and misconceptions of OCD" (White, 2014)

could do an analysis of a text set that includes the authors who compose (or do not compose) illness narratives, the characters who are (or are not) represented, and the illnesses that are (or are not) featured. Such an analysis could facilitate a discussion about why some races, genders, classes, and illnesses are privileged or underrepresented in YA illness narratives. Students might have a role in constructing the text set by reading YA illness narratives other than the focal texts (e.g., Thomas's *Nowhere Near You* [2017], the sequel to *Because You'll Never Meet Me*) during independent reading time or as part of a book club. The Goodreads "YA Illness" list and the Schneider Family Book Awards can help teachers and students find additional YA illness narratives.

> Allowing students to write about subjects that are uncomfortable and maybe even risky in the school setting . . . can provide student writers with the agency gained by the adolescents featured in the YA illness narratives.

Composing Illness Narratives

Our final lesson idea involves asking students to respond to the YA illness narratives they have read and to the discussions prompted by some of the above lesson ideas in their own illness narratives (of those of people they know or about whom they have read in fiction or nonfiction). Recent scholarship (e.g., Bathina, 2014; Johnson, 2014) has discussed the challenges and power that can come from students sharing vulnerable moments in school writing assignments. As Johnson wrote, "Critical pedagogies like Freire, skeptical of teacher-centric formal schooling, cast students' personal narrative writing as evidence of student empowerment" (pp. 575–76). Allowing students to write about subjects that are uncomfortable and maybe even risky in the school setting, as Johnson's article discusses, can provide student writers with the agency gained by the adolescents featured in the YA illness narratives. Furthermore, asking students to hyperlink to particular scientific and medical terms within their illness narratives will emphasize interdisciplinary connections.

Students' illness narratives can become a way to increase audience knowledge about particular illnesses, thereby embodying the "taking action" element of critical literacy often missing in curricula (Lewison et al., 2002). For example, teachers might encourage students to write their illness narratives with pharmaceutical or insurance companies in mind so as to facilitate critical thinking about the role corporations have in patient agency. Such work aligns with Freire's (1970) idea of "problem-posing education" in which "people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves" (p. 64).

Conclusion

Contemporary YA illness narratives provide many opportunities for discussions of agency in the secondary English classroom. An analysis of these texts may provide ways for students and teachers to engage in interdisciplinary analysis characteristic of the medical humanities and called for within the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Incorporating the medical humanities into the secondary English classroom through analyzing YA illness narratives may also help students understand the interconnectedness of content areas that are often presented separately. Students might consider the ways in which their English language arts course connects with their science and health courses—rarely discussed in connection with one another—and understand how these content areas inform one another.

Patients who write illness narratives gain agency, and doctors who read them gain an understanding of them as humans versus patients. In much the same way, the three focal YA illness narratives we have recommended here give adolescents a voice, be it spoken, electronic, or drawn, that counters ideas of adolescents' lack of agency in medical spaces. Readers of YA illness narratives come to understand adolescents with illness as more than just patients. Not one of our focal books ends with just a diagnosis or a cure; their characters refuse to be defined by their physical or mental illness.

Exposing students to adolescents who have a voice, who are empowered, and who also hap-

pen to have a physical or mental illness can go far in a curriculum with social justice aims. Presenting adolescents with agency who are more than just ill bodies and minds, YA illness narratives can be used in the secondary English classroom to engage students in discussions and engaging activities that help them think critically about agency in these fictional depictions and in their lives. Whereas the depictions of illness in each of these three books are vivid and real and the diagnoses severe and grave, *people*, not patients, exhibit agency in these texts.

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Sarah J. **Donovan**

Leaning into Young Adult Literature as Our Curriculum:

The Intimacy of Choice

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

The last weekend of the summer, my father called me in a panic. A pipe in his condo had burst, and he needed help. I called the plumber and told him to meet me at my dad's place. I hadn't been in his condo for years because he never let any of us in, but on this day, I discovered he had been living in squalor, had become a hoarder, and was no longer capable of living on his own. Against his will, he came to live with me that night, and I started school the next day.

My dad's life came up again and again in my writing that school year. During dedicated free-write time in my junior high classes, I wrote my stories while students wrote theirs. I wrote a poem about how my dad was an only child who spent hours in his room gluing model cars when he wanted to be playing catch with his father. Alternating between settings, I also wrote about how my dad was kicked out of the choir at school and found solace in running. I wrote a drama about the time my dad said to me that he would trade any of his 11 children for the chance to see one of his inventions on the streets of America. And in the spring, I wrote his obituary.

I wrote in these different forms because I was inspired by what I was reading at the time: Tim O'Brien's spatial shifts in *The Things They Carried* (1998); the verse form of Patricia McCormick's *Sold* (2006); the temporal shifts in Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Echo* (2015); the point of view in. E. Lockhart's *Fly on the Wall: How One Girl Saw Everything* (2006). These books invited me into different places, times, and experiences while I was grieving the loss of my dad. At times, I was escaping. At times, I was comforted. But all the time, my relationship with words was changing. I think this is the psychology of books.

Jesus, one of my students (all student names are pseudonyms), sketched panels inspired by G. Neri's *Yummy* (2010) and devoured Todd Strasser's *If I Grow Up* (2010) in one day, which inspired him to write an advice piece for his younger brother. Last year, Erin read Marilyn Hilton's *Full Cicada Moon* (2017) followed by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminist* (2015), after which she wrote a TED-like talk about women in science and how she is going to change the world. Books plus readers equal a synergistic effect that defies measurement.

When teachers make choice *the* reading and writing curriculum, students learn about books, writing, and life, as well as the writers and readers we are and are becoming. We read and we write to make sense of our lives, to stretch moments, to imagine conversations, to remember smells and sounds, and sometimes, to reimagine memories with new endings.

Writing is a way of bearing witness to our lives, and I think many authors write as a way of witnessing humanity and making accessible to readers the

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lives within and beyond their own. A poem, a story, a drama, a list, a book becomes an artifact of humanity, taking on a new life and purpose if/when it makes its way into the hands, hearts, and minds of readers.

It is for this reason—the reason that most literature does not come from a place of teaching or didacticism—that teachers must be careful about "using" young adult literature to teach a topic or to "cover" a theme. Representations of mental illness, trauma, and violence in young adult literature can promote

> **A poem, a story, a drama, a list, a book becomes an artifact of humanity, taking on a new life and purpose if/when it makes its way into the hands, hearts, and minds of readers.**

understanding and knowledge "about" humanity and being human, but one book cannot teach "about" depression or trauma or explain resilience or surrender.

As a result, for the past three years I have leaned away from whole-class novels or units developed around a theme. It has felt too much like I am "covering" rather than uncovering by labeling or naming a unit according to a culture or topic. Literature reveals such intersectionality that I just could not find a way of framing a unit without marginalizing important features of a story. And by dedicating several weeks of instruction to one theme, I felt like I was limiting opportunities for discovery and exploration arising from the needs of individual students.

This is not to say that there is no place for a whole-class novel study, which can unite a class with a shared reading, but it is to say that there are a lot of great books out there that are not making it into the hands of our students because of past practice. There are at least two new books on the market reviving readers workshop for the high school classroom by offering a framework that balances core texts and independent reading (and so much more): Kelly Gallagher and Penny Kittle's *180 Days: Two Teachers and the Quest to Engage and Empower Adolescents* (2018) and Kate Robert's *A Novel Approach: Whole-Class Novels, Student-Centered Teaching, and Choice* (2018).

Because this issue is about psychology, a very personal subject, and the books I am reviewing include potential triggers, I am going to offer methods that allow the reader's experience to be intimate: readers read at their own pace, stopping as needed, seeking support as needed, or abandoning a book as needed.

First, I offer two books that, because of language and content, may be a better fit for older young adult readers, *In Sight of Stars* (Polisner, 2018) and *Blood Water Paint* (McCullough, 2018). Then, I suggest a book that can be stretched into junior high, *The Night Diary* (Hiranandani, 2018), and finally, I offer two anthologies, *#NotYourPrincess* (Charleyboy & Leatherdale, 2017) and *Hope Nation* (Brock, 2018), filled with voices of hope. All of these books explore trauma but also represent the strength and resilience of teens confronting the sources of trauma.

Books of Hope and Resilience in the Face of Trauma

In Sight of Stars, by Gae Polisner

The main character, Klee (pronounced Clay), is grieving the death of his father, a man who told him stories of magic and introduced him to the world of art. On top of that, his mother, "Ice Queen," uproots Klee from Manhattan to a suburb during his senior year of high school. Klee's loneliness is temporarily assuaged by Sarah, a fellow art student, who recognizes Klee's talent and offers physical comfort, but when Sarah pulls away from Klee, he spirals in and out of reality, eventually landing in a psychiatric hospital for teens known as "Ape Can."

Polisner utilizes temporal shifts, depending on Klee's mental state and where he wants to be, or can be, in his consciousness: the present, recent past, or distant past. Klee's internal monologues juxtaposes flashbacks and recent scenes, aligning the reader with the narrator and observing "tender distance"—a less intimate scene in deference to the target readers' young age. A reader will feel Klee's instability. Vincent Van Gogh's life and art are woven into and through the narrative as both subtle and overt allusions to humanity's fragility and resilience. The story navigates therapy and recovery after a traumatic psychological break, and readers bear witness to this process with the gentle guidance of two strong female characters, a compassionate therapist and a clever nun.

Blood Paint Water, by Joy McCullough

Artemisia Gentileschi is an iconic painter from the seventeenth century. When Artemisia was 17, she had taken on most of the duties at her father's art studio and was preparing to marry a trusted teacher. However, her handsome fiancé raped her, and she was forced to undergo a trial for her honor—a trial that involved torture. This historical fiction novel is written largely in verse, partially in second person, but mostly through Artemisia's first-person perspective with her late mother's bedtime stories of the biblical Susanna and Judith in prose. Her mother passed away when Artemisia was just 12 years old and thus before the story takes place, so Artemisia's father raises her and her brothers. Artemisia's fire comes from her mother and is put to the test when the judge, jury, and bystanders intimidate her to rescind her claims. It is based on a true, brutal story (e.g., rape, torture, beheading) that inspires further inquiry into art, trauma, and implications beyond the life of the survivor.

This book was first a play. Joy McCullough, wanting Artemisia's story to reach more teens but convinced it would not be published, "wrote it completely and unapologetically" for herself. In the same interview, McCullough explains her choice to write in verse: "I think it can be really easy for the details of day-to-day life in a distant historical novel to hold the reader at arm's length. When those things are stripped away, though, as they are in verse, I think it makes it easier for the reader to relate the story to their own time and life." She explains that verse "allows the reader to make emotional leaps . . . rather than having a horrifying scene described in full detail" (Ansbach, 2018).

The Night Diary by Veera Hiranandani

The night before the Partitioning of India in 1947, 12-year-old Nisha is struggling to understand the implications of the end of British rule on her half-Hindu, half-Muslim family. She writes diary entries to her mother, who passed away when she and her twin brother were born, in order to make sense of why her family is in danger. Nisha lives in what is now Pakistan, and the family must travel hundreds of miles to India and safety. The epistolary format is poetic apostrophe. Nisha confides in her mother's memory of the riots and border crossing, but also writes of her special relationship with Kazi, the Muslim family cook who teaches Nisha to cook and ignites her love of food—another way to express herself.

In an interview with National Public Radio (Montagne, 2018), Hiranandani explains that she is from a "mixed background"—her father is Hindu, and her mother is Jewish. It followed, then, that she wanted Nisha to be from a mixed background, "not only for my own personal connection, but it allowed me to explore her own sense of belonging during this time, and it allowed me to open up and break through some of the bias and explore some of the questions I had about that time." Around 14 million people migrated during this time, but rather than confront teen readers with graphic images, Hiranandani lets readers experience the migration through Nisha's innocence in order to "open up some of the truth" of that period while representing what most 12-year-olds could relate to—her father, brother, food. Nisha does not understand how brave she is.

> **A page or chapter can offer students a shorter piece to ponder on days they may be feeling out of sorts or overwhelmed by a scene in their novel.**

Two Collections

#NotYourPrincess: Voices of Native American Women, edited by Lisa Charleyboy and Mary Beth Leatherdale, includes the words, art, and photography of 58 different Native women. *Hope Nation,* edited by Rose Brock, includes personal stories and original essays from 24 young adult authors. I think it is important to include anthologies in classroom libraries. Not only do most anthologies work as inclusive artifacts, bringing together a range of voices, but selections can be read in any order. A page or chapter can offer students a shorter piece to ponder on days they may be feeling out of sorts or overwhelmed by a scene in their novel. Also, anthologies can spark new interests in subjects and authors.

A student can turn to any page in *#NotYourPrincess* to bear witness to lives of today's indigenous women: an illustration by Danielle Daniel (Métis) beside a poem, "Two Braids," by Rosanna Deerchild (Cree); a celebration of a mother's past and a daughter's future; and two pages of a short story in graphic novel form, "A Tale of Two Winonas," by Winona

Linn (Meskwaki), who rewrites the "mythical Winona leap." The multigenre collection is painful, beautiful, and brave, yet the form acknowledges that there are still many stories to be uncovered.

In *Hope Nation,* a student can read an essay by Angie Thomas, author of *The Hate U Give* (2017), to witness her book tour across America and how her words changed minds and hearts. Another student will meet I. W. Gregorio, a practicing surgeon, author of *None of the Above* (2015), activist for intersex youth, and founding member of We Need Diverse Books. This woman is changing lives every day with her work and words. None of the hope, however, comes without some grappling with what it means to be human.

> **Young adult literature advocates will never be able to innovate curriculum if our newest teachers have not developed a commitment to reading young adult literature.**

Commit Class Time

Given the rich selection of books available to young adult readers, including those described above, I encourage the creation of a classroom space that centers students' interests. Start class every day—10 minutes or so—with personal-choice reading. And that includes middle school, high school, and, yes, college classes, too. Teacher candidates will say they want to read more, but there just isn't time, given their myriad responsibilities; however, if teachers do not have a rich reading life, then they will not be able to offer recommendations or engage in meaningful conversations about the books teens are reading or want to read. Young adult literature advocates will never be able to innovate curriculum if our newest teachers have not developed a commitment to reading young adult literature. If we start prioritizing personal choice reading in class, using class time, everyone—teachers and students—will have richer reading lives.

During reading time, walk around and check in with a few students each day. Some days, simply write down the title and page number associated with the books being read; this will avoid interrupting the flow. Occasionally, stop and ask a student or two what they are thinking and feeling about their reading choice. You will notice patterns in students' book choices and reading paces. If students are not making progress, suggest another option. These 10 minutes, you will discover, may have the greatest impact on the reading lives of your students.

In these brief, private conversations with your students, you are able to personalize instruction while relating to your students as fellow readers and, in the case with teacher candidates, as teachers. When you notice students are reading something particularly sensitive, you'll be positioned to offer comfort, guidance, and insight. Here are some questions to get started:

- *Tell me what's happening in the book right now.*
- *What are you noticing about how the author sequences the narrative?*
- *What emotions are stirring in you?*
- *What ideas and events are causing tension?*
- And the best follow-up question is this: *What makes you say so?*

After reading time, transition into something new; ask students to connect to your whole-class work or do a quick pair-share:

- *What's hard about being human for your main character?*
- *How does the writing style enhance, create, or distance tension?*
- *What is one word to capture what happened in the plot today?*
- *What do you want to know or understand better?*

These quick discussions help readers process their reading experience and hear about other books, and they help nurture a community of readers.

Choice in Reading Response

CER—claim, evidence, reasoning—is a simple frame to help students engage with texts and to help teachers assess understanding and progress toward learning standards. However, the process of making a claim, finding evidence, and articulating reasoning is rather complex; students must reflect, reread, and ponder how the text is constructed and how an author's choices are impacting their reading experience. I have

modified this popular acronym with another "R": response. (Please see Appendix A for sentence stems to support CERR.) When teachers ask for analysis and close reading, it is easy to overlook personal response.

To include response in this process, encourage students to find a medium that allows them to process their reading in a meaningful way. Many students already have a YouTube channel, but students do not need to go public. If you have access to technology, you can download a Chrome extension called Screencastify (free), and students can vlog about their book. Screencastify allows students to simply click an icon on their browser, click record, and talk for up to 10 minutes about their book; the video is then automatically downloaded to Google Drive. Vloggers can share the link or embed the video on a class blog such as Kidblog. I love seeing students in their kitchens or basements, sitting in a favorite chair with a book in hand, but what is even better is listening to them read aloud a passage that resonates with them.

Two alternatives to vlogging that allow students more artistic expression include designing quotes and #booksnaps. One student rearranged CERR to ECRR; she preferred starting with a quotation or evidence rather than a claim. Using Canva, a free app, she designed the background for her quotation, carefully choosing colors and fonts to match the tone. Then she wrote about the quotation, unpacking the meaning of the words, focusing on connotation. Another student used an app called Pic Collage for his responses; he took a picture of the page he wanted to analyze and then inserted thought bubbles with claims, reasoning, and responses; this medium was made popular as #booksnaps by Tara Martin (2016).

For the entire school year, my students have been posting a weekly response on their blog to document their reading experiences. The range of titles represented on our class blog speaks to the rich reading lives students can have if only given access to books and time to read them. There are many options for setting up a class blog. I have used Kidblog for several years; teachers have administration rights and can set privacy to just the teacher, the class, and even the public (if you want students to share their portfolio of reading and writing with parents or guardians). This space is not for submitting assignments but rather for creating and nurturing a community of readers and writers. Students get ideas for their to-read list from classmates, and are inspired to try out new writing techniques they find there. As a result, my role has shifted from teacher to community member.

Conclusion

When we as teachers make time to read young adult literature, we invite our students to learn alongside authors and gain a community of co-teachers. Teaching can be lonely at times; teachers struggle to be all that our students need from us. Let the literature do the work.

In one semester, a student may read *In Sight of Stars, Blood Water Paint, The Night Diary, #NotYourPrincess,* and *Hope Nation.* What impact could access to these stories and these authors have on that student's writing? Reading and writing are not to be compartmentalized in the English classroom. Make time and space for students to draw from the craft of great young adult authors to write through the stories of their lives.

After reading *The Night Diary*, my student Aarushi wanted to write her immigration story in a series of diary entries. Brianna had found a diary written by her great-grandfather; she wanted to "translate" his diary from cursive to print so that she could read it. After a mini-lesson on literary apostrophes, she had the idea to write letters to her deceased great-grandfather within his diary, responding to his words and experiences with her own. *In Sight of Stars* will inspire students to write with temporal flashes. How empowering for a writer to start with present day and then flash to the past to explore a connection or antecedent. *Blood Water Paint* will illuminate the possibilities of verse, to understand the art of word economy, to feel how verse allows a writer to explore complex, even traumatic moments with sensitivity. I did not have access to this book earlier in the school year, but this is the first year I have seen a seventh grader write a short story in verse, and it changed her understanding of language and story. In offering the classroom as a safe space to uncover stories within and beyond our daily lives, teachers can validate the place of choice and voice in our story of English education.

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Appendix A: Sentence Stems to Support CERR

Claim:
- I noticed . . . when . . . .
- The effect of . . . on . . . is . . . .
- X believes . . . .
- The theme of this chapter is . . . .
- The setting change made the characters . . . .
- The choice X made caused . . . to happen.
- The way X reacted caused . . . to happen.
- The word . . . hints that . . . might happen.
- The most important word is . . . .
- When . . . happens, my heart/mind is moved.
- When . . . happens to X, I understand our world better.
- When . . . happens to X, I understand my life better.
- X is a stereotype of . . . .
- X defies stereotypes because . . . .
- Classism influences . . . .
- Racism influences . . . .

Evidence:
- For example, the text states . . . .
- Evidence from the text states . . . .
- According to the text, ...

Reasoning:
- The words in this quote, like . . ., show . . . because . . . .
- The quote relates back to something earlier when . . ., which proves . . . .
- These words caused . . . because . . . .
- If X did not . . ., then . . . . Therefore, ...
- If X did not realize . . ., then . . . . Therefore, . . .
- This quote shows how . . . caused/reacted/changed . . . because . . . .
- This quote made me think . . . because . . ., so it relates to my claim because . . . .

Response:
- Include your personal thinking, response, connections, opinion, concerns, and ideas about the world, humanity, big concept.
- Express what are you learning about the world or life through the characters and literature. Does the story sound familiar or is it a life different from your own?

Marissa **Fackler**
Christie **Eppler**
Jung Hee **Hyun**
and Kristine **Gritter**

Still Looking for Alaska:
Exploring Female Identity Development after Trauma

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/.

Looking for Alaska, John Green's 2005 Printz Award-winning book featuring life at boarding school, was the most challenged young adult (YA) novel of 2015 (Coles, 2016). The book is banned mainly for concerns centered on language and sex, especially one description of oral sex received by protagonist Miles "Pudge" Halter. However, the awkwardness of the scene is not what troubles us. The sex scene is brief and unromantic, not a passage to savor. It's a plot point that makes sense. What troubles us in *Looking for Alaska* is our perception that Miles defaults to misogynistic treatment of women while still earnestly dropping hints that he wants to understand Alaska as a person. When Miles spends Thanksgiving with his roommate, the Colonel, the Colonel's fabulous diner waitress mother, and Alaska, he yearns, "It made me hope that one day I could meet Alaska's family, too" (p. 92). Yet the book is silent on what makes female characters tick. Alaska Young serves as a silent and mysterious muse for Miles, especially in the last half of the book after she dies in a car crash. The silencing of topics of female identity shaped by trauma is a grave danger of censorship.

In this column, we seek to understand Alaska. We want to address what is underneath Alaska's sexual risk-taking, why she seems to lack empathy, and why she acts as she does—making her unlikable for many readers. Finding Alaska requires an understanding of trauma and mental health from a systemic perspective. Marissa Fackler, graduate student and emerging English teacher, and Kris Gritter, editor of this column, appealed to counselor educators Christie Eppler of Seattle University's Couple and Family Therapy and June Hyun of Seattle Pacific University's Counselor Education programs for deeper insight into this challenged text. What follows is a conversation around several key ideas.

Manic Pixie Dream Girls and Trauma

Marissa: What bothers me about Alaska is she represents the archetype of a manic pixie dream girl (MPDG) that everyone loves to love. What's wrong with this archetype from your point of view?

Christie: It is a heavy burden to be every cool thing at once. Before the MPDG, there were tropes that defined womanhood (i.e., nerd, rebel, outcast, or beauty queen). The MPDG manages to combine all those characters into one archetype—an impossible goal for anyone but a fictional character! You take the beauty queen, put clunky glasses on her (outcast), have her fight for a cause (rebel), and have her listen to obscure music and read important tomes (nerd). This is yet another unrealistic story that is set before us, distracting us from women who dare to claim what they are without labels.

June: Alaska's character is hidden behind the MPDG mask. Her story is not told or explored with care. No one seems to be curious about who she is underneath her mask. This may represent our society's attitudes toward adolescent girls, creating mysterious characters but labeling them as not normal. It may be easy to say she is too rebellious to deal with instead of listening to her story carefully and trying to help her.

Kris: As you read **Looking for Alaska** *as mental health workers making text-to-mental-health-world connections, what do you see in the character of Alaska Young that can help readers understand the effects of trauma on female identity development?*

Christie: I see Alaska as both a representation of a typically developing white, cis-gender, heterosexual adolescent and someone whose development has been marked by one of the most significant childhood traumas—the loss of a parent. Alaska is mysterious, impulsive, and moody. These are traits of many adolescents. Alaska is fearful; she keeps relationships at a distance. She may have romantic and/or friendship feelings for Miles, but she is dedicated to her off-campus boyfriend. Her relationships are literally and metaphorically distant.

    The void of grief work in her childhood created a template for how she interacts with others later in her life. Miles recounts the "central moment of Alaska's life":

> When she cried and told me that she fucked everything up, I knew what she meant now. And when she said she failed everyone, I knew whom she meant. It was the everything and the everyone of her life, and so I could not help but imagine it. I imagined a scrawny eight-year-old with dirty fingers, looking down at her mother convulsing . . . . And in the time between dying and death, a little Alaska sat with her mother in silence . . . . She must have come to feel so powerless. . . . (p. 120)

Silence, fear, powerlessness, and attention to death are common themes in a grief story.

June: Observing Alaska indirectly through Miles's eyes makes me think there must be something going on beyond her hormonal changes and the identity development of adolescence. Her behaviors of isolating herself from peers, pushing others from her social boundaries, feeling intense loneliness and sadness are typical responses of those who experience loss (Rando, 1988). Mental health researchers discuss how those who experience trauma express anger, helplessness, and fright. Expressing anger, which sometimes is displayed through rebellious or withdrawn actions, helps adolescents gain control over their life. These symptoms would be more intense for individuals who did not experience proper closure over a loss. In addition, the closeness of the relationship between Alaska and her mother would exacerbate the intensity of grief (Bugen, 1977). Research suggests that people who lose their father or mother in their childhood are more likely to be unhappy in their later life than those who did not. Even 10 years after the death, there is significant lingering unhappiness (Moor & Graaf, 2016).

Kris: Alaska describes her mother's death when she describes the worst day of her life. She blames herself, as her father seems to do, as well. What insights do you have about her confession that she should have called 911 and the self-blame she inflicts upon herself?

June: People who experience grief and loss feel guilty. Most of the guilt is associated with feelings that they should have spent more time with the loved one, loved him or her more, or that they should not have been angry with that person. Alaska surely felt the negative impact of knowing that her father placed the blame for her mother's death on her, not to mention his lack of support afterward. No adult told Alaska that the death was not her fault, and she did not have the chance to say a proper goodbye. No wonder she doesn't seem to practice a proper greeting with a stranger. (Remember the scene in which she meets Miles for the first time.) What I was impressed by about John Green is that he depicts the distance in all of Alaska's relationships with others—including her closest friends, Miles, the Colonel, Lara, and Takumi—throughout the text.

Christie: After the death of her mother, which was likely immediately after the mother's brain aneurysm, there was no one telling Alaska that her mother's death was not her fault. As a child, Alaska was only starting to grasp that death is universal and permanent. She did not yet have the words to express her grief. Her father, also grieving, did not provide a safe space where Alaska could understand that she did not cause the death, even if she did not call 911.

Manic Pixie Dream Girls and the Male Gaze

Marissa: Miles's first description of Alaska is "the hottest girl in human history" (p. 14). The first time they meet, she pulls down his shorts. We soon see that sexually inexperienced Miles is fascinated by her risky sexual behaviors, promiscuity, and attention seeking from men. She does not seem to have close female friends. Are these traits significant from a mental health point of view? Do you see traits in her that those of us trained in literacy but not psychology might miss?

Christie: I think therapists and literary experts approach a text in a similar way; we both search for meaning. What comes into my mind is, how does this behavior make sense in context (e.g., family and life at a boarding school)? Pulling down Pudge's shorts makes sense in context to me because many traumatized children see emotions as scary and believe that it is best to keep relationships at a distance. Yanking down Pudge's shorts is a way to objectify him. Objects can be safe because they are not laden with emotions. Alaska can claim pulling down the pants is a feminist act—as a woman she is subverting male power by becoming the objectifier. For a traumatized child, it is also a way to emphasis one aspect of a relationship—the sexual—instead of cultivating a relationship built on respect and trust. Later in the novel, Miles and Alaska make out. The scene has the emotional spark that was lacking when Miles and Lara have oral sex. However, Alaska runs away, distancing herself, even as she struggles to sustain emotional connections.

Marissa: Do you have insight into why Alaska's past trauma is fetishized by Miles, who turns it into a sexual mystery?

Christie: Miles was faced with an unknowable mystery, the experience of childhood grief. He tries to make sense out of it within his development and social location. His mind's automatic response is to create a sexual story—a common narrative about females from his point of view. Miles needs to question how he can validate, be curious, and deconstruct his dominant narrative so that he can be fully himself, more than a sexualizer, thus allowing him to see Alaska as a real and complicated human. Trauma silences; it distances us from ourselves. Miles, grieving his friend, is also traumatized, and we need to extend the same compassion for his grief that we seek for Alaska.

Supporting Women (Who Have Been Traumatized)

Marissa: What strategies allow women to love who they are?

Christie: I think the core feminist concepts of being communal and transparent allow women to love who they are. Women, humans, need communities where there is deep listening, acceptance, validation, and curiosity. They need to be vulnerable and transparent about their real selves in safe environments.

June: I think listening to others without judgement could create a place for women to love who they are. It is disappointing to see there are no adults who listen to Alaska. It was only when Miles, the Colonel, Takumi, Lara, and Alaska talk about the best and worst days in their lives that Alaska is able to open up and share her loss. From that point on, Miles understands Alaska a bit more and sees her mask hiding a scar that has not healed.

Christie: One of the central unanswered questions in the text is, "How did Alaska see herself?" (We only know her through Miles's story.) Did she see that she did the best she could when her mom died?

Alaska did not let her mom die alone. Maybe even as a young person she knew that her mom died instantly, and she trusted young intuition to be there with her fully instead of running to call 911. How did she cope after her mom died? Did her dad take care of her, or did she take care of her dad? How does she see men now having lived with her father after the death of her mother (e.g., as distant, as someone needing to be taken care of)? For Alaska and other adolescents, there is challenge in recognizing their own power while letting others nurture them into realizing their full selves. Everybody, but especially youth, needs someone to step in and comfort, provide a reality check, and validate. It is natural that one's mind goes to "should have," but that does not make the "should have" the right choice. It is okay to feel sad and scared. Someone needed to say to Alaska, "You were a child, and you were doing the best that you could." Or, "You blame yourself. What would it look like to forgive yourself?"

Addressing Trauma in Challenged Texts

Kris: As you read **Looking for Alaska***, what were the obvious signs for help that might be discussed in an English class? Alaska says early on, "Y'all smoke to enjoy it. I smoke to die" (p. 54). What other, more subtle markers do you see that imply this story might not end well for Alaska?*

Christie: For resilience, strong and supportive relationships are significant (Becvar, 2013). It is tempting to assess Alaska as having had strong bonds because she hangs out with Lara, Captain, Takumi, and Pudge. However, when we look closely, she is distant in nearly every relationship (e.g., her father, Captain, her off-campus boyfriend, and Miles).

When Alaska says: "I may die young . . . but at least I'll die smart" (p. 53), she seems to reveal a preoccupation with death. I think this is a significant way that Alaska's development differs from peers without a childhood grief experience. Adolescents are known for thinking they are invincible and immune to death. Alaska knows the realities of death; she is attracted to books that explore the ultimate mysteries in life: why are we here, and where do we go when we die? On my first reading,

I was surprised by the under-reaction of Alaska to the prank that destroyed her book collection. Although mercurial, Alaska did not appear bereft when her collection was destroyed.

Of course, drinking is common among adolescents, but binge drinking brings risk, and it did make me wonder about Alaska's motivation to harm herself without fully committing to suicide. Her risky behavior seems to leave open the possibility that suicide could be an unintended outcome.

June: If I, as a school counselor, heard Alaska saying, "You spend your whole life stuck in the labyrinth, thinking about how you will escape it one day, and how awesome it will be and imagining that future keeps you going, but you never do it. You just use the future to escape the present" (p. 55), I would call her immediately to the office and contact her caregivers for further support. She sounded like she was stuck but could not figure out how to get out of her situation. What does she mean by using the future to get out of the present? Does she feel stuck in the labyrinth (that is, the present)? Is she suicidal?

Another statement—"I don't understand why I screw everything up" (p. 95)—sounds to me like another way of her crying out for help. Nothing-or-all language, extreme thoughts, and exaggerated sentences are typical dysfunctional thought processes that may be found in adolescents who experience trauma. And when she says, "It's not life or death, the labyrinth. Suffering. . . . suffering is universal" (p. 82), I hear her trying to normalize, which may help her smooth her scars and pains. A counselor's help walking along the healing path is needed.

Kris: How can the language of trauma be addressed in an English language arts class?

Christie: First, by talking overtly about trauma and its effects. Banning this book subverts important conversations. We know that not talking about trauma does not help children cope with trauma. Teachers can encourage people who challenge this book to see that silence does not help either the traumatized or those in a position to understand trauma. Empathetic dialogue helps heal. Along with

talking about the text using the concepts above, I think an English language arts teacher could help students write their own stories, help young people be curious. What could they add to Alaska's story? Or their own story? When I work with adolescents, I ask them to fill in the prompt, "Young women should . . . ." I then ask them to consider, Who is telling them about these "shoulds"? Do they agree? They may choose to be a beauty queen or a rebel or even a MPDG, but my hope is that they will do it intentionally instead of following a script that was written before they were born.

June: One thing that I ask suicide-counselors-in-training to do is to shout out the word "suicide" several times. Once the shock value has worn off, meaningful discussion can take place. Not discussing suicide in class does not protect students, and I suggest my students consider this same technique in their future classrooms, if the school culture will allow. There are a lot of taboo topics—sex, suicide, drugs, abuse, trauma, etc.—that parents/caregivers/administrators/teachers are advised not to discuss in the classroom, but these topics should be discussed openly. Discussion is care. Discussing trauma does not invite trauma to be experienced. Reading about trauma in developmentally appropriate texts within supervised classroom settings helps students understand the symptoms of trauma and provides opportunities to learn how to read, respond, and deal with it.

Marissa: What would it mean for Alaska to be Alaska?

June: She needs help understanding her mourning. Parental death is one of life's most stressful events (Dowdney, 2008; Kaplow, Layne, Pynoos, Cohen, & Lieberman, 2012). When parental death is experienced between the developmental stages, clarifications between "reactions to parental death" and "normal conflicts of adolescence" especially need to be recognized (Keenan, 2014). Counselors or therapists would be helpful in the process. She needs both social support and clear, honest information about her mother's death. Without this, Alaska is unable to develop trust, relationships,

self-esteem, or self-worth. Instead, she experiences the loneliness, isolation, and inability to express feelings that we see in this book (Ellis, Dowrick, & Lloyd-Williams, 2013).

Kris: As mental health experts, do you think this book should be challenged or removed from English language arts classes?

June: I would like to see the school counselor and teachers work together to create lessons with this book—lessons on trauma and support, social/interpersonal relationships, and trauma and healing. A first lesson might begin with a question to students, "Why do school counselors want students to read this book?" This would prompt an honest discussion on why some adults may not like students to read it, while others would. More intentional discussion questions would also be beneficial for students by helping them to experience the social and emotional learning components and to unfold their own story: "What do students notice from each character regarding how they respond to Alaska's trauma?" "What would you do in this social circle as a friend of Alaska?" "How is your story similar to Alaska or different from Alaska?"

Christie: I like that this book was challenged because of the discussion it brought forth, specifically the conversation between counselors and teachers. I want this dialogue to be a model for schools, so that collaboration and support for students, especially traumatized students, will increase. Students need the opportunity to see a story from multiple perspectives and through multiple interpretations. It's okay to dislike Alaska initially; after all, creating community is hard when someone's automatic default is to keep distant. However, these are the prompts of a rich text discussion. Students and teachers benefit from questioning their own beliefs and assumptions: How can a school community respect an individual for who they are while helping all promote their best selves? What are safe communities? When is it okay not to be transparent? If the women in this novel had voices, how would we know them as persons? How might it change our view of Alaska?

Keeping *Alaska* Alive and Well in Classrooms

Texts might be challenged for a variety of good reasons, but if a text provides valuable learning for adolescents as determined by a community of discerning stakeholders, it deserves to remain accessible. School counselors and school psychologists should be part of decision-making processes about censorship as they consider the needs of adolescent students within the contexts of mental health. *Looking for Alaska* deserves to be read because of its presentation of the complexity of a vulnerable young woman and her resulting risk-taking and sometimes unlikable behaviors. Alaska's behavior makes more sense if her trauma is understood by readers, and *her* trauma gives voice to the trauma of other adolescents. Young adult literature is a powerful tool for empathy when finding a hidden story. *Looking for Alaska* is an excellent example of this.

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Michelle M. **Falter**
with
Leigh A. **Hall**

Peeling Back the Adolescent Armor:
Putting a Positive Spin on Using Social Media for Secret Sharing

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/.

"I feel bare. I didn't realize I wore my secrets as armor until they were gone and now everyone sees me as I really am."

> —Tris in *Insurgent* (Roth, 2012, p. 151)

Teenagers like to think that they are made of armor—that "words will never hurt them." However, adolescence can be a difficult time for many middle and high school students, particularly when growing up in the digital world. Social media sites and apps simultaneously allow users to reveal and also hide who they are. Helping adolescents navigate this world can be difficult for parents and teachers alike.

This past year, during Michelle's English Language Arts Methods course, several of her preservice undergraduate students were huddled together chatting about a problem they saw in their field placements. A messaging app, called Sarahah, was wreaking havoc at their middle schools. Their students were posing questions and posting videos and pictures of themselves, and other students (presumably classmates) were anonymously responding. The students who originally posted wanted feedback from their peers; however, instead of receiving kind feedback, students were using this app to bully each other.

Because a user responds anonymously, no one knew who had written the hateful comments. Although some middle school students were cyberbullied, they continued to use the app to connect with friends.

Michelle's preservice teachers were bewildered by this and wanted to know what to do. Although she had not heard of this app, she told the preservice teachers that she would brainstorm some ideas. Over the course of the semester, she wondered about the ways in which English teachers could combat this problem through layered literacy work—in other words, combining young adult literature, social media apps, and multimodal stories as a way for English teachers to talk more openly with their students about potential perils of social media use. One YA text that can open up such conversations is *Life by Committee* by Corey Ann Haydu (2014).

Life by Committee

Life by Committee is a story about Tabitha, a book-loving, gifted student who has recently been shunned by her two best friends who think her new look is too grown up and slutty. Her parents, with whom she has a close relationship, are young and a bit reckless but still loveable in their hipster ways. Tabitha distances herself from them, as she is struggling to cope with a new baby on the way. Additionally, Tabitha has a serious and not-so-secret crush on her classmate's boyfriend, Joe, who she chats with online each night.

As she navigates this difficult time, she turns to an online website, called Life by Committee (LBC).

This anonymous online community requires members to share their secrets and ask the group to give assignments that attempt to empower the members to act upon their problems. However, the online community doesn't always give the best advice and bullies its members into engaging in questionable behaviors. Throughout the novel, Tabitha is tormented with the tasks she is assigned, their ethical implications, and the possible repercussions, while at the same time craving the group's attention.

Overall, adolescent readers will find themselves simultaneously rooting for Tabitha while finding her naive. Tabitha's story is authentic in its complicatedness; she is a mess and makes stupid choices, but in the end, she is highly relatable in regard to her social media usage. Like Tabitha, the teens in our ELA classrooms will continue to find online outlets to share parts of themselves, so teachers, too, need to find ways to help their students imagine positive ways to use social tools to seek understanding of peers rather than to bully each other.

> **As English teachers, it is important to think about our role in supporting students' responsible use of these online digital tools and in facilitating thoughtful conversations about the role these media should have in shaping who we are and how others view us.**

Adolescents' Social Media Use

Adolescents often feel pulled in multiple directions as they gain more independence from their families, begin discovering who they are, and consider how they fit in with their peers. Their need for privacy and their need for connection to others is often at odds. While teens in the past might have shut their bedroom doors or put locks on their diaries, today's teens carve out their own spaces online through various social media platforms. In those spaces, they lay bare their minds, bodies, and souls, sometimes in public ways, but also increasingly through the guise of anonymity.

For example, on the Life by Committee website that Tabitha joins, the rules are quite clear: "No

names, it says. No locations. We are from everywhere. We are everyone" (p. 70). Tabitha, under the anonymous screen name Bitty, shares, like all the other members of LBC, "at least one secret a week" (p. 73). The secrets include things like: kissing someone else's boyfriend; being bulimic; not wanting to go to college; buying a history paper off the Internet.

As teens have become more tech savvy, they have started resisting media platforms that archive material, such as Facebook and Twitter, to connect and share information about their lives. Instead, adolescents are opting for less permanent avenues, such as Snapchat and Instagram stories, and anonymous messaging apps, like Sarahah or, in the case of *Life by Committee*, an online discussion community. No matter how savvy adolescents may be, social media has its pitfalls. Figuring out how to help adolescents navigate this semi-private world can be hard. As English teachers, it is important to think about our role in supporting students' responsible use of these online digital tools and in facilitating thoughtful conversations about the role these media should have in shaping who we are and how others view us.

In Real Life (IRL)

Social media helps teens feel more connected to their friends' feelings and daily lives and can help support them through challenging times (Lenhart, Smith, Anderson, Duggan, & Perrin, 2015). Despite these positive feelings, adolescents reported witnessing, experiencing, or personally engaging in problematic online behaviors. For example, according to a 2011 Pew Survey, among teen social media users, 88% have seen cruel behaviors on a social network site. Of that group, 90% say they ignored the mean behaviors they witnessed, 67% witnessed others joining in, and 21% of them joined in on the harassment, too. Interestingly, teens in this study preferred to view this cruelty as "drama" rather than using the term "bullying" (Lenhart et al., 2011).

Seventy-five percent of adolescents also reported that people are less authentic on social media than they are offline. Additionally, even when teens reveal authentic representations of themselves online that they did not share with others in real life, their peers are skeptical (Lenhart et. al, 2015). They don't always find those representations to be authentic or genuine.

As teens figure out who they are both in real

life and online, they are often drawn to social media that allows anonymous posting, like Sarahah or, in Tabitha's case, LBC. The lure of more secretive platforms seems to be that teens are able to share private information or thoughts without the risk of acquiring permanent labels; they can explore differing perspectives and try on identities and personas. Anonymity allows teens to probe and experiment with those parts of self without being rejected in real life. For example, in *Life by Committee,* one of the online users, Agnes, does not want to go to college; the group helps her weigh her options, ultimately assigning the task for her to apply for a year of volunteering in another country.

Regardless of the platform, using social media is a risky endeavor for teens. Medical experts have found a strong correlation between social media use, cyberbullying, and depression among US young adults (Lin et al., 2016). Some experts have even coined this phenomenon, "Facebook depression" (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). In *Life by Committee,* both Tabitha and Sasha, who used the LBC website, become more anxious, depressed, and desperate as the novel progresses. These statistics articulate a need for teachers to engage in conversations around social media use and literacies practices within the ELA classroom. Haydu's novel provides that opportunity.

In Young Adult Literature (IYAL)

Over the past five years, the amount of young adult literature dealing with online, digital, and social media platforms has grown exponentially. Just like in real life, young adults in these novels are figuring out who they are and who they want to be using social media. Koss and Tucker-Raymond (2014) found that YA characters use digital media as a way of playing with, constructing, and developing their identities. In their study, they found that teens in YAL used digital technologies to construct online identities in one of six primary ways: a) to maintain social status, b) position themselves as part of a group, c) find acceptance, d) find romantic relationships, e) hide one's true self, and f) be anonymous. Each of these constructions aligns with what teens in real life do.

Koss and Tucker-Raymond (2014) did not move beyond identity construction in their analysis of these texts to look at the role of social media as a secret keeping and sharing device and its potential for cyberbullying. English teachers, however, can easily develop and expand this conversation using a YA novel like *Life by Committee* or several books together in literature circles, encouraging students to compare and contrast how each book explores responsible or irresponsible use of online social spaces. (See Figure 1 for more YA novels dealing with social media use

Figure 1. YA novels about social media and secrets

Book Title/Author	Social Media Used
Albertalli, B. (2015). *Simon vs. the homo sapiens agenda.* New York, NY: Balzer + Bray.	Email
Cooner, D. (2017). *Worthy.* New York, NY: Scholastic.	Social Media App
Day, S. (2010). *Serafina67: *urgently requires life*.* New York, NY: Scholastic.	Blogging
Day, S. (2012). *My invisible boyfriend.* London, UK: Marion Lloyd.	Emails, DMs
Geiger, A. V. (2017). *Follow me back.* Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Fire.	Twitter, SMS, DMs
Gurtler, J. (2014). *#16thingsithoughtweretrue.* Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Fire.	Twitter
Hussey, W. (2015). *Jekyll's mirror.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.	Anonymous social network website
McManus, K. (2017). *One of us is lying.* London, UK: Penguin.	Social Media App
Ockler, S. (2015). *#scandal.* New York, NY: Simon Pulse.	Facebook
Schorr, M. (2017). *Identity crisis.* New York, NY: Simon Pulse.	DMs, Online Community
Vail, R. (2014). *Unfriended.* New York, NY: Penguin.	Facebook, SMS

and secrets.) Additionally, students could trace how Tabitha and the characters of LBC in *Life by Committee* construct their identity in the six ways mentioned above.

Some people say you are what you eat; but in the world of social media, one might argue you are what you *tweet*. Having discussions about how the online self is simultaneously a *real* and *fake* representation could help students explore a character's conflicts and struggles within the text and also connect the stories to their own lives and social media use. Teachers might also facilitate conversations about how different forms of social media (Snapchat vs. Twitter, etc.) impact how characters or people behave, reveal, or portray themselves.

Humanizing the Other through Shared Secrets and Stories

In 2012, NCTE passed a resolution on confronting bullying and harassment. They urged English teachers to find books, digital media, and other multimodal sources related to bullying and harassment and bring them into the classroom curriculum as a way to examine and prevent bullying. By layering students' own experiences with social media alongside YA novels' representations of characters' experiences with social media, teachers can begin to work toward this resolution. Sometimes those conversations will be enough; other times they will not.

> **Social media can be a power for good if we allow ourselves time to see what unites and binds us rather than divides us.**

Sometimes teachers need to go a step further and provide students with inspiration for creating a kinder, gentler, more tolerant online world where one can share more freely without fear of harassment. Haydu's novel offers some inspiration at the end of the text for this kind of work. When Tabitha decides that sharing secrets anonymously has done more harm than good, she takes an opportune moment at a school assembly to reveal her secrets to the whole school. Her act of bravery inspires others to come on stage and "own up to everything you hate about yourself or secretly love about yourself but know to hide" (p. 282). Through

this experience, the students, administrators, and faculty "are in it together" (p. 286) in a moment of shared empathy and compassion.

Although *Life by Committee* is fiction, teachers could develop a social media project that focuses on sharing secrets in order to find commonalities among each other through storytelling and art. Understanding that being human means we are all fallible and complex can move the conversations around sharing secrets on social media from shaming to celebrating and connecting. In the next section, we describe six projects that do just that. We invite teachers to consider how they might have students view, explore, analyze, and even replicate these projects. Social media can be a power for good if we allow ourselves time to see what unites and binds us rather than divides us. We need to model these practices in our English classrooms.

- **Post Secret:** Post Secret (https://postsecret.com/) is an online community art project where people mail in their secrets anonymously on one side of a postcard. The postcards are often handmade and multimodal in design. The creator of this project believes that sharing our secrets brings people together. Several books have been made from the postcards that have been sent over the years.
- **Humans of New York:** Humans of New York (http://www.humansofnewyork.com/) started off as a simple photography project and turned into one of the most popular online phenomena with over 20 million followers on social media. Combining photographs of everyday New Yorkers with quotations and short story vignettes, the world has been captivated by the beautiful lives of strangers.
- **The Strangers Project:** Starting with the simple question "What's your story?", Brandon Doman's project (http://strangersproject.com/) is about collecting stories in public places around the country. The intention is that through stories and the power of words, we can find a shared humanity, even with strangers.
- **Project Semicolon:** Project Semicolon is an organization (https://story.projectsemicolon.com/) dedicated to the prevention of suicide. Through the symbol of the semicolon, people all over the world have tattooed themselves as a reminder and inspiration that one should not give up hope; your story

isn't over. The website reveals dozens of portraits and stories from people of all ages talking about their experiences and hopes for the future.

- **Before I Die/Confessions:** Artist Candy Chang created two powerful art installations. The first, "Before I Die" (http://beforeidie.city/), is a global art project that invites people to contemplate death and reflect on their lives by filling in a blank and writing on a wall. The second, called "Confessions" (http://confessions.candychang.com/), was inspired by Post Secret and experiments with concepts of anonymity, vulnerability, understanding, and consolation.
- **The World Needs More Love Letters:** This organization (http://www.moreloveletters.com/) uses the power of social media to give love, hope, and inspiration to people all over the world. The task is simple: nominate someone who needs a love letter for whatever reason; the organization will post requests every two weeks on their website. From there, people who feel so moved write and mail a love letter to those strangers who need it.

Conclusion

Helping adolescents navigate the world of social media is of critical importance. Discussing social media use through young adult texts like *Life by Committee* can allow adolescents to become more savvy consumers and producers of digital texts. By layering in multimodal storytelling and analysis projects, teachers can help their adolescent students be more thoughtful and mindful consumers and producers within this digital world. Such instruction can help usher in a new generation of more empathetic and thoughtful human beings.

Doing this work also opens up critical and visionary conversations about what online spaces could and should look like for teens, particularly as they try on real and fake personas through anonymous apps and communities. As much as some adolescents want to believe that they are made of impenetrable armors, we know that cyberbullying is real and has consequences. As English teachers, we need to help our students navigate these ever-changing spaces by imagining positive ways to use social media to understand each other and our shared humanity.

Michelle M. Falter *is currently an assistant professor of English Education at North Carolina State University. Formerly, Michelle worked as a middle and high school English teacher in Wisconsin and Georgia and also abroad in Ireland, Germany, and the Dominican Republic. Michelle's scholarship focuses on dialogic, critical, and feminist pedagogies, English teacher education, adolescent literature, and emotion in the teaching of literature and writing in secondary classrooms. Michelle's work has been published in the* Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, Study and Scrutiny: Research in Young Adult Literature, English Teaching Practice and Critique, *and* The ALAN Review, *for which she received the 2016 Nilsen-Donelson Award for the Best Article of the Year. Currently, she is working on two coedited books with Steven Bickmore about discussing death through literature in the secondary ELA classroom. They are set to come out in late 2018 with Rowman & Littlefield.*

Leigh A. Hall *is a professor at the University of Wyoming where she holds the Wyoming Excellence in Higher Education Endowed Chair in Literacy Education. Her research currently examines how to engage middle and high school teachers in online professional development that is interactive and collaborative in nature. Her research has received several awards, including the Outstanding Dissertation award from the International Literacy Association, the Early Career Achievement Award, and the Edward B. Fry Book Award* for Empowering Struggling Readers: Practices for the Middle Grades *(both from the Literacy Research Association). She has published in such journals as* Research in the Teaching of English, Journal of Literacy Research, Teachers College Record, *and* Harvard Educational Review.

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Brandy **Colbert,** Emery **Lord,** Neal **Shusterman,** Sonya **Sones,** and John Corey **Whaley**

Complicating Conceptions of Mental Health:

A Collaborative Conversation

From the Editors: In this collaborative written conversation, we are honored to feature the words of Brandy Colbert, Emery Lord, Neal Shusterman, Sonya Sones, and John Corey Whaley, five YA authors who explore mental health with care in their work. We appreciate their willingness to engage so thoughtfully and candidly in this discussion.

As to process, we generated and sent the authors a series of questions and then compiled their initial responses into a single document. The authors revised the conversation in a shared document to solicit questions, elaborations, and revisions until all were satisfied with the end result. We hope readers enjoy the thoughtful insights offered by these authors.

How do you, as authors, navigate issues of mental health in your writing? When you conceptualized your books, did you set out to write stories that addressed issues of mental health?

Brandy: I did set out to write about mental health in *Little & Lion* (2017), but only after several rounds of false starts. I eventually decided on bipolar disorder because I'm always pushing myself to explore unfamiliar topics. I'm also drawn to issues that are widely stigmatized, and I think bipolar disorder is especially misunderstood.

Emery: I set out to write full lives that, while fictional, felt a bit like my own—good lives with considerable struggles with mental health as part of inner life and relationship dynamics. In some

of my books, mental illness is explicitly stated and central. In others, it is present but with varying degrees of awareness/management. In all cases, I try to weave personal experience with physician input and feedback from beta readers who share diagnoses.

Corey: It was my intention from the beginning with *Highly Illogical Behavior* (2016) to explore anxiety and the way it's seen from those living with it and the people around them. Agoraphobia, too. Honestly, writing about mental illness felt like something I needed to do more than I wanted to. I wrote this book at a particularly high-anxiety time in my life when the only way I could think to get myself out of my own head was to write about what I was going through—about the isolation, misunderstanding, and utter chaos of mental illness.

Neal: As Corey says, pulling from your own life experience is extremely helpful in both exorcising your own demons and providing a gateway for readers to understand what it's like. In *Challenger Deep* (2015), I tried to address mental illness head on, from within the illness. Rather than writing *about* schizophrenia, I wanted to take the reader through it. I wanted the book to feel like a psychotic episode, so when the reader is done, he or she truly has a sense of what it's like to be so lost in your own mind, it's as if you're at the bottom of the ocean. Usually I do a lot of research for my books. I would say this is the only book that I

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intentionally did no research for . . . because our family lived it. I didn't want to write a book about what I *read* about mental illness. I wanted to relate the personal experience of what my son and what we as a family went through. While Caden Bosch is a fictional character, a lot of what he experiences is taken from real life.

Sonya: I can really relate to that, Neal. I've been deeply affected by having a family member with mental illness, too. Because of my sister Diane's struggles, I chose to write about characters dealing with similar issues in both *Stop Pretending* (1999) and *Saving Red* (2016). I hoped these stories would help mentally ill teens and their friends and families feel like they weren't the only ones going through this, while at the same time helping to encourage compassion in readers who have no personal experience with these diseases.

How might your books foster opportunities for readers to explore issues of mental health?

Emery: In the center of something like depression, especially as a young person, I just felt the rain whipping my face; I had no sense of the aerial, meteorological view of the storm. I think reading authentic fiction provides a way to conceptualize these experiences, even when the details vary. In this way, narrative distance can feel really safe and characters become proxies. You can process your feelings about a book without necessarily confronting your own situation. (Or, you can consciously relate the entire time and find camaraderie!) And hopefully—whether it's in a classroom setting or in chatting about the book with a friend—use the language of mental health.

Brandy: I think approaching the topic honestly is most important. It was hard to find young adult literature that discussed mental health when I was growing up, and if you happened to find the rare book that did, it was always presented as a cautionary tale or was so sensationalized that it never seemed as if you or the people around you could be dealing with the same issues. I hope readers can see themselves or people they know in my stories,

or that my books can open up a new perspective they've never considered.

Corey: For one thing, I hope readers can see the mistakes that characters in my book make regarding how they deal with mental illness and start there. Start with what NOT to do. Start with love and acceptance and go from there. I would hope that by delving into specific illnesses like agoraphobia and anxiety (panic disorder), the book can foster better understandings of readers or their peers who suffer from mental illness and maybe encourage more open conversation.

Sonya: My sister Diane would agree with you, Corey. In 1998, when I found out that my first novel, *Stop Pretending*, was going to be published, I worried that she wouldn't want her privacy invaded. I'd based the story on her first bipolar breakdown and how it affected our family. But when I offered to use a pen name, Diane, who was a children's librarian, told me she had no problem with my sharing her story. She said, "A book like this could be used to open up discussions about mental illness in schools!" And I've heard from so many teachers who've told me that this is exactly what happened. I think any book about a mentally ill character creates the space to end the awkward silence and begin the much-needed dialogue.

Neal: I echo Brandy's comment about approaching the subject as honestly as possible; we must recognize, too, the problem of portrayals that sensationalize the illness and, in so doing, distance readers. Those kinds of stories do a disservice to the subject because they can add to the stigma rather than alleviate it. I think what's important in terms of helping readers to explore such issues is to find something they have experienced—or at least can imagine experiencing—and then liken it to the experience of mental illness.

There are many times in *Challenger Deep* where I'm taking common experiences and connecting them to the feeling of mania, or delusions, or hallucinations. It's also critical that the reader relate to the character. The reader should feel that he or she is Caden, or that Caden is a brother, or

cousin, or best friend. It's not some stranger "out there." This is happening to someone very close to home—someone you want to comfort, someone you want to save, someone you want to see save him or herself.

How do your readers respond to your representations of mental health?

Neal: The response has been overwhelmingly positive. At events, people want to share their stories about loved ones or what they've personally been through. Readers have said that the novel has helped them to see through the eyes of a loved one struggling with mental illness, and those who struggle have said that it makes them feel less alone. There was one time a girl came to a book signing and couldn't contain her tears. She told me that she had been suicidal, and the book helped her make it through that difficult time. There have been times when I've been with my son, Brendan, whose own struggles inspired the book, and people have thanked him for being so open and brave about it, and they have come around the table to give him a hug. So in many ways, the book was a healing experience for him and for our whole family, as well.

Emery: People have certainly reached out to let me know they connected. I've cried with (and celebrated with!) readers—for their reasons and for my reasons and for the relief of finding places where our reasons overlap. But I'm also sure there are readers who don't connect at all and are maybe even frustrated by my portrayals. It's something I experience pretty frequently as a reader myself. You experience storytelling through the lens of what you've been through, and that's okay!

Sonya: I've received hundreds of heartfelt and moving emails—like this one from a 16-year-old boy with a mentally ill brother who had just read *Stop Pretending*:

> . . . There are so many similarities between what you wrote and my current-life situation it's unbelievable. Without a doubt, your book helped me stop being so "numb" to my situation. I'm not trying to be dramatic, but your book changed my life for the better. Thank you for sharing your story,

which made living with mine so much more bearable.

> Letters like these make me hopeful that *Stop Pretending* has redeemed at least a little bit of my sister's suffering.

Corey: I've been really surprised and pleased by the way young readers, especially, have responded to Solomon's story. I can't count the emails or post-event meet and greets where teens have shared their own struggles with mental illness. It's been inspiring, but also tough at times.

Brandy: I've had a positive response overall, which was a relief, especially with *Little & Lion*. I don't have bipolar disorder and am not close with anyone who does, so I was nervous about getting the representation right. I did research by reading memoirs, and I'd consumed media over the years that focused on bipolar disorder, but everyone's experience is different, so I knew that my main job was writing the character as a human first. I was also happy to receive positive responses for the anorexia I explored in my first novel, *Pointe* (2014). I know my portrayals won't resonate with everyone, but I've been grateful to get direct feedback that says I've done an accurate job.

How can literature complicate conceptions of mental health?

Corey: By creating empathy. If readers feel pain and joy for a character with mental illness, their conceptions of it in real life are surely affected positively.

Brandy: It's never a good idea to write a story with a lesson to tell; I don't like feeling preached to, and I assume the same of my readers. I think it's also unfortunate when a book infers that there's only one way a mental illness can manifest or that it might only affect certain groups. Personally, I remember not understanding how mental illness affected the black community for so long because growing up, it was stated quite often that we're too strong as a people to worry about something like mental health.

Neal: It's not so much "complicating" conceptions of mental health as it is rounding them out and giving them depth. So often people see mental illness in a one-dimensional way—as if clinical depression is just moodiness, or mania a behavioral choice. I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say things like "They should just snap out of it." It's ignorance, yes, but ignorance bred by a society that has been afraid to discuss mental illness in the open. Literature, however, can educate. It shackles you to a character, forcing you to experience things with him or her. With luck, you'll come out at the other end with understanding and empathy that you didn't have before.

Sonya: Exactly, Neal. Which is why I get so mad when I read a book with a mentally ill character who's just there to be made fun of or is portrayed as someone dangerous. Characters like these only serve to further the cruel stigma against the people who are affected by these diseases.

I struggled with this myself when I was writing the climactic scene of *Saving Red*. In the first draft, Red, a teenage girl suffering from schizoaffective disorder, threatened to jump over a cliff while holding the narrator's beloved dog in her arms. This was more dramatic than in the second draft, but ultimately I chose to replace this scene with one that wouldn't help perpetuate the myth that all mentally ill people are violent and to be feared.

Emery: Because literature has a lot of power, it also has a lot of potential to complicate. That can be a positive thing, like Corey and Neal mention. If a reader has misconceptions about mental illness, fiction can challenge those beliefs. But as Brandy and Sonya bring up, literature itself can actually reinforce misconceptions or, just as likely, viewpoints that are limited in scope. For example, medication can be a facet of mental illness. A character may want, resist, resent, decline, or not need medication; the character may have side effects or not, use trial and error or not. These are all true-to-life experiences and important to write about. But if 9 of 10 YA books featuring mental illness are narrated by characters who hate medication (or if 9 of 10 books present medication as the only way forward), what implicit messaging are young read-

ers getting? When a single book is held up as The Way Depression Is—no matter how personal and well-done—readers may not understand that it is only one representation and, by definition, has limitations.

When you consider depictions of mental health in the field, what is working and what's missing?

Sonya: My fellow collaborative conversationalists have written wonderful books with mentally ill narrators or about characters who have family members or friends with mental illness. But I can't remember reading a novel about a mentally ill teen where the illness doesn't drive the plot or define that character—where it's simply presented as another trait, like being tall or short. That doesn't mean it hasn't been written, just that I haven't found it yet. But if it doesn't exist, I hope it will soon. Because though a person might have mental illness, that doesn't have to be what defines them. And lots of people with mental illness are living happy and fulfilling lives with the help of the right medications and/or therapy. A story about someone like this, if it were written without sugarcoating it, might give a lot of hope to a lot of kids.

Neal: My concern with mental health as depicted in books and other forms of media is that it shouldn't feel like a "trend" or an "issue of the week." This is an aspect of the human condition that needs to be destigmatized and discussed on a regular basis if we are ever going to address it in a meaningful way.

I am also frustrated by stories—more in film and TV than in YA literature—that wrap everything up neatly and easily. Or worse, stories that wind into futility. First of all, there are no easy solutions to mental illness. It's an ongoing battle, but with treatment and the support of friends and loved ones, it's manageable. Then on the other hand, there are the fictional stories that simply end badly and don't offer light to anyone. Certainly there are heartbreaking stories, but they are not the only stories. I strongly feel that it's more important to tell stories of hope.

I also get frustrated by the tired trope of blaming parents or painting them as clueless or in

denial. I suppose it's easier to sleep at night when you can be dismissive. "It could never happen to me because I'm so much smarter and wiser than that." None of the parents of mentally ill kids I know are clueless or in denial. They know what's happening, but they find themselves powerless to stop the ravages of the disease. All they can do is fight the good fight and help their child navigate through it, for better or worse. Navigating is the key. Not all paths lead to clear sailing, and not all paths lead to a bottomless waterfall. But if you can navigate the hazards ahead, that's half the battle.

Emery: The books that have worked best for me are the ones that authentically portray mental illness as just one part of complex identity—tied to socioeconomics, race, gender, sexuality. As a reader, I particularly love the incorporation of dark humor (*My Heart and Other Black Holes* [Warga, 2015]) and unflinching, thoughtful nuance (*History Is All You Left Me* [Silvera, 2017]). I think we need to seek out more and more and more of those other factors of identity, and do it in a range of genre and tone so we're meeting students where they are. And I'd particularly like to see more of those novels by writers of color being well-supported by publishers.

Corey: I think what's working in young adult literature, at least, is a willingness by many authors to be open and honest about why mental illness matters to them—and why these stories have to be written and shared. What's missing is, like Emery said, a wider selection of books written by authors of color, representing readers of color. It will take a lot more work before black, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latinx kids and teens have the same reflection of their voices in literature as their white counterparts. This isn't just missing in books on mental illness, of course, but in all areas of publishing.

Brandy: I'm always thinking about whose stories are being told and who is telling them. So while it's great that we have a broad range of mental health stories focusing on white teens, we're severely lacking when it comes to those stories about black teens and other teens of color. Mental health looks different when it's shaped through the lifelong lens of discrimination and oppression, and we need

more stories on the shelves that dig into those experiences—especially books written by people who are part of those communities.

Brandy Colbert is the Stonewall Award–winning author of Little & Lion *(2017),* Finding Yvonne *(2018),* Pointe *(2014), and the forthcoming* The Revolution of Birdie Randolph *(in press, 2019). Her work has been named a Junior Library Guild selection and a Book of the Month Club selection and has been included on ALA's Best Fiction for Young Adults list, as well as best-of lists from* Kirkus, Booklist, Publishers Weekly, Vulture, *and more. Brandy lives and writes in Los Angeles.*

Emery Lord is the author of contemporary YA novels The Names They Gave Us *(2017),* The Start of Me and You *(2015),* Open Road Summer *(2014), and the Schneider Award-winning* When We Collided *(2016). Her books have been published in 10 languages around the world and featured on YALSA and state book lists. She lives in Cincinnati, Ohio, with her family and the shelves of books that she considers family.*

Neal Shusterman, winner of the 2015 National Book Award for Young People's Literature for Challenger Deep *(2015), is a novelist, screenwriter, and television writer. His novel* Unwind *(2017) won over 30 state, national, and international awards.* Scythe *(2016) was a 2017 Michael L. Printz Honor book, and* Thunderhead *(2018), the second book of the series, premiered at #3 on the* New York Times *bestseller list in January 2018, remaining in the top 10 for over two months. Neal has written for the* Goosebumps *(2011) TV series, and he wrote the Disney Channel Original Movie* Pixel Perfect *(2004). He recently sold the original TV series* Cry Victory *(forthcoming), which he created with his son Jarrod, to Crackle, and his upcoming novel* Dry *(in press, 2018), also cowritten with Jarrod, sold pre-publication to Paramount studios, with the father/son team writing the script.*

Sonya Sones has written seven young adult novels in verse: Stop Pretending *(1999),* What My Mother Doesn't Know *(2001),* What My Girlfriend Doesn't Know *(2007),* One of Those Hideous Books Where the Mother Dies *(2004),* To Be Perfectly Honest *(2013),* Saving Red *(2016) and* The Opposite of Innocent *(2018). Her books have received many awards, including a Christopher Award, the Myra Cohn Livingston Award for Poetry, the Claudia Lewis Poetry Award, a* Los Angeles Times *Book Prize nomination, and a Cuffie Award from* Publishers Weekly *for Best Book Title of the Year. But the coolest honor she ever received was when she landed on the*

ALA's list of the Most Frequently Challenged Authors of the 21st Century. Her books have been recognized by the ALA as Best Books for Young Adults and Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Readers and have received many state awards. She lives near the beach in southern California.

John Corey Whaley *is the Printz and Morris Award-winning author of* Where Things Come Back *(2011),* Noggin *(2014), and* Highly Illogical Behavior *(2016). Whaley, a Louisiana native, was a public school English teacher there for five years before publishing his first book. He now spends most of his time touring and speaking to teenagers about books, mental illness, and identity. In 2014, his sophomore novel,* Noggin, *was a finalist for the National Book Award for Young People's Literature. He currently lives in the Los Angeles area.*

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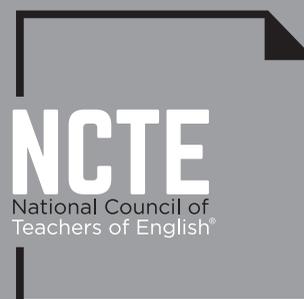
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