

# Introducing My Students to My Friends in Young Adult Literature

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## Introduction

One strategy I use to introduce my students to books is that I talk about the characters in the books as if I know them, as if they are my friends. I explain that just like real friends, they (the students) will be intrigued by some and may choose to meet them; they will be unimpressed by some and choose not to meet them. Their choice is theirs to make; I have the privilege to describe my friends and their situations so my students can make an informed decision.

The first day in my Adolescent Literature class we invest time introducing ourselves to each other. I know we have to begin building a community of learners and provide a safe learning environment if students are going to take risks and discuss ideas and situations that are controversial. We have to have a sense of safety and community because strangers do not discuss topics that make them uncomfortable (Benton & Daniel, 1996). After students and I have introduced ourselves, I tell them about the newest friend I have made in the book I am currently reading because there is intensity in my telling as I tell about the character in the present tense.

For instance, last year I began telling them about Tish in Cynthia Voigt's *When She Hollers*. I was genuinely concerned about Tish's well being since I had to close the book and go to work; I left her at her school after the teacher was so blatantly incompetent and unfeeling. I explained to my students that Tish has been sexually abused by her stepfather and she is tired of it; she is desperate. She is carrying a knife in her boot. She told him at breakfast that she had a knife; her mother was in the kitchen but chose to ignore the conversation. Tish has not met one adult who will advocate for her. I am frustrated. I need to get back to the book to see how Tish is doing and what she's deciding to do. I so hope she doesn't hurt herself! I promise the students I will have read the book by our next class meeting, but I also promise them I won't tell them how it ends. I can see many of them care about my friend, Tish; this is the beginning of their introduction to Young Adult Literature. Several students had read the book by the next class.

This semester as students were introducing themselves to the class, I told a musician about A. C. Lemieux's *Do Angels Sing the Blues?* The main character, Boog, is devoted to his music and has the support of his parents. His best friend, Theo, is the lead singer and has the charisma for the group, but Theo's father thinks his music is a waste of time and hassles him to do something important. I confess that I am not musically inclined, but I cared about music when I read this book. I felt the cathartic release and the creative expression that Boog felt.

"Oh by the way," I add, "another great book that has a strong musical theme is Bruce Brooks' *Midnight Hour Encores*. Sib, a sixteen-year-old female, wants to see her mother. Her dad, Taxi, is agreeable and in fact, he buys a VW van to travel across the country as a way to set the stage for Sib to know her mother. During their journey Taxi talks of life 16 years ago by describing the causes, politics, and thinking of the time. While Taxi talks, Sib interprets what she is hearing on the cello. It's a fascinating journey and I don't play an instrument. People who know music, lose themselves in this book!"

## Let Me Tell You About

Throughout the years I have gradually learned to give students more choice in what they read. I provide them with a partial bibliography, seven pages long. I try to model what I hope they will do in their future classrooms: give their students choice in their reading and time to talk about the books (Atwell, 1998; Rief, 1992; Rosenblatt, 1978). To let them know what some of the books are about, I tell them about what my friends are doing, how they are being challenged, and describe their situations. I talk about them in the present tense. I use strong verbs and I am emotional when I tell them about the authority-hungry adults who not only offer no help but rather purposefully put obstacles in their way.

For instance, I tell them about Chris Crutcher's *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*. Eric Calhoun and Sarah Byrnes are best friends, partly because no one else would be their friends. Eric is overweight and Sarah is disfigured by scars. That's why they became friends but that's not how they stayed friends. Eric is telling us the story. He admires Sarah's toughness. She presents a steel-hard exterior to the world. She takes a beating from Dale Thornton, local bully, rather than giving him her lunch money; and when Dale threatens Eric for his money, Sarah threatens Eric if he does give Dale his money. She wore Dale down and he targeted easier prey.

Sarah and Eric start an underground newspaper entitled, "Crispy Pork Rinds" to represent Sarah's burned face, Eric's fat, and the leftover news no one else prints. They experience the power of the pen as they anonymously attack others. When Eric goes out for the swim team, Sarah announces she knows he won't be her friend for much longer because he'll lose his excess weight and be accepted by others. Thus, the title of the book, *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*; Eric continues his swimming, but tries to eat enough to stay fat so Sarah will know how important her friendship is to him.

One day in Contemporary American Thought (CAT) class Sarah zones out; she does not get up when the bell rings; and

she is hospitalized in a mental institution. Eric is extremely worried about his tough friend. He goes to see her but it's like she's not there. He is afraid. If something can mess up Sarah Byrnes, then Eric knows he could be annihilated.

I tell students a little bit about Chris Crutcher, that he is a therapist in a mental health facility in Washington state. His books deal with hard issues that many, too many, of our students face. As in all of Chris Crutcher's books, there is a strong adult mentor. Coach Lemry is the teacher of CAT and the swim coach. She is trustworthy, thoughtful, and an advocate for students. She also knows where her expertise ends and it is refreshing to hear an adult admit that she does not know something, but it's especially difficult to hear her say that when she's talking about my friend, Sarah Byrnes. Even though I know it's true.

In *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, by Avi, Charlotte is traveling by ship from England to America in the early 1800s. She is a proper young lady, accustomed to the finer things in life, accustomed to polite society. She is the only passenger on the ship, a mistake at the outset of the books, so her only equal is Captain Jaggery. Zachariah, the old Black cook, tires to befriend Charlotte, but she is offended by his gesture. Zachariah gives her a dirk and tells her of the last voyage aboard the *Seahawk* when Capt. Jaggery had a crewmember's arm severed for not tying a knot to his expectations. Charlotte is horrified that Zachariah is telling her these lies about the Captain.

We witness Charlotte's transformation as she learns of human nature apart from titles, begins wearing sailor's clothing, and learns how to be a crew member. Charlotte's entire world is turned upside down when she considers that those in authority might be wrong and even cruel.

### Small Group Discussions

At the beginning of the semester students present their own book activities to the entire class. These activities range from readers' theater scripts, dioramas, bulletin boards, collages, structural critiques, aesthetic responses, memorabilia bags. Found poems, I AM poems, simulated journals, ABC poems, letters to and from characters, semantic differential forms, character sketches, visual representations, and more. These ideas are found in Joan Kaywell's four volume series of *Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics*. Even with 35-50 students in a class, the first two to three weeks every student can usually present his or her activity because they don't know each other very well, and strangers don't confide in strangers.

However, by the fourth week of class, we have to begin our small group discussion so everyone has the opportunity to share his or her activity and talk about the book in depth. Then each group decides on one activity that the whole class needs to see/hear/experience. Students choose their own groups and they may change groups from week to week, although when a student has changed to another group, he or she has always stayed with their second group choice. I provide them with a form to fill out so I know who is in which group; they write their name, book title, author, and activity.

Having the small books discussions is probably the most unselfish professional act I perform; class is not as much fun for me because I cannot be in each of the small groups, but students love their groups. They develop friendships with each other as they share their vicarious experiences with their new

book friends. They talk frankly and openly with their friends in this small and safe environment. Then when they share with the whole class, they have had their activity validated by their small group, and their confidence is evident and their presentation is rehearsed.

I am always thrilled and amazed by the rich discussion that we do engage in during the semesters. I tell students at the beginning of the semester that I hope each of us (myself included) will be uncomfortable sometime throughout the semester because we are confronted with a new idea or a new perspective than the one we have always had about something. I promise them I will make the classroom safe intellectually, physically, and emotionally, but until someone tests that safety, being safe will be taken for granted. Everyone has the opportunity to speak. I will defend your right to speak even if I do not agree with you. Hopefully we will not always agree on everything; that would be boring but safe, much like Sameness in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*. When someone makes a statement that challenges what you believe, you may question their idea but I will not allow anyone to attack someone else verbally or physically.

Students have shared with the class their own bouts with depression after reading Zibby O'Neal's *The Language of Goldfish*. After presenting an original artistic drawing representing her interpretation of O'Neal's *In Summer Light*, one student confided her attempts to commit suicide. I have found that students completely relate to O'Neal's characters and struggles of they don't get it because it doesn't speak to their experiences. During a presentation another student shared her recent decision not to take the drug ecstasy. Classmates had all kinds of questions and were amazed to learn how prevalent the drug was on their campus and in their city. Classmates also responded with encouragement for the speaker to stick with her decision to stay away from the drug. One student entrusted us with his struggle accepting the fact that his wife's brother is gay. He admitted that he liked his bother-in-law as a person, but he was shocked to learn that he was gay. He had to think through his prejudice and it was not easy.

Through my years of teaching Adolescent Literature at the university level, I am especially pleased that discussions about homosexuality have become more common and thoughtful. Ten years ago students were very reluctant to read books that depicted gays and lesbians, and discussions tended to be superficial. Students have privately confided in me that they were beginning to understand what their brothers who died of AIDS had lived through, as they determine when it is safe to share their deceased loved one with others.

Four years ago students read the books out of curiosity and snickered when they talked about the books. One student told the whole class, "I read this book [holding *Annie On My Mind*] because I had never read a lesbian book before. I read it very quickly because I was looking for the lesbian parts. [She giggled.] I read right over them. They weren't that good, really. [She giggled again.] I think I will reread it because I think it's really a love story about two people rather than just a lesbian story." Even with her giggling, I was pleased with the truth she spoke. I commented that we will have made great strides when we can truly see gays and lesbians as people dealing with the very issues and situations that straight people do.

In the past year, my students read many books that have

gay and lesbian characters and they openly discussed the conflict of the story without getting distracted by the characters' sexual orientation. I see this as a huge marker that we are making progress as a society. Our literature is reflecting our society, and our students are indicating our society is more open to diversity. I am hopeful we will get to the point where characters can be gay and that not be the issue.

### Conclusion

Throughout the semester, my students and I refer to our friends. I know it sounds hokey, but it works. I think it works because I am sincere. I really feel like I have made many friends by reading so much. When we talk about the book, we talk about the characters as if we really know them. We have invested a lot of emotional energy with some of the characters. It's like we've been through the experiences together. A student who was not majoring in education donated the books he had bought that semester with a note attached that read, "Please share these books with other students. I want to share my new friends with others."

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