

EVERYTHING

David Lubar

Three years ago, ALAN journal's editor (fondly known as the Belle of Tallahassee) allowed me to appear in these pages — a move not unlike inviting Spanky and Alfalfa to an embassy brunch. Since then, I've experienced a dizzying rise from total obscurity to vague familiarity. Thanks in part to ALAN, I'm mistaken for much more important people these days than ever before.

To honor the end of Dr. Carroll's reign as editor, I've been asked to write another article. After a great deal of thought, and after accepting the sad truth that I have a hard time making decisions (I've been known to hover for twenty minutes in the produce department trying to pick the right tomato or, more importantly, avoid picking the wrong tomato), I realized there's only one possible topic worthy of this event. Everything. So, in this article, I'll cover the entire history of YA literature, past, present, and future, describe the important people and organizations in the field, and explain everything I've learned as a writer of YA novels. If there's space left over, I'll toss in my wife's recipe for cream of broccoli soup.

The History of Young Adult Novels

In 1951, J.D. Salinger, author of such action-packed works as "A Perfect Day for Banana Bread," and *Franny and Zoozoozooey*, creates a new genre with *Catcher in the Rye*, spawning an industry frenzy for novels with red covers. Teachers rejoice, and celebrate this emerging literature by assigning *The Brothers Karamazov*. Also in 1951, three-year-old Chris Crutcher grows his first mustache.

Ten years later, Harper Lee creates a YA classic that doesn't have a single YA character. A short time after that, S. E. Hinton, realizing that she's just as qualified as Salinger to go by her initials, writes several ground breaking YA novels while still in utero. Teachers across the land respond by assigning *Silas Marner*. Robert Cormier, feeling that Holden Caulfield got off too easily, kicks the crap out of his characters. Things start to get interesting. Judy Blume and Stephen King write about girls getting their first period, with broadly different outcomes. Someone points out to M. E. Kerr that she also has two initials.

In the eighties, angst reigns supreme. During that decade, YA novels give us 837 rapes, 943 murders, 1,247 suicides, 12,457 dead parents, 19,382 dead pets, and three smiles. Legions of dogs are bred for the sole purpose of dying in the penultimate chapter. So many parents drown that the Red Cross steps in to offer free adult swim lessons to any interested fictional characters. Loneliness runs rampant — nobody

wants to be the main character's best friend because that's almost a guaranteed death sentence. During this period, I attempt to write books using my first two initials, but people misread the meaning of D. R. Lubar and hound me for amphetamine prescriptions.

The nineties bring us a huge diversity and bold experimentation. Characters get drunk, use bad language, and contemplate intercourse, just like Holden Caulfield, but authors bravely use their whole first names. Except for J. K. Rowling, but then again she can do whatever she wants, even if it means that an entire generation of her book-toting fans will eventually suffer scoliosis. (One youngster was already tragically

crushed when he tried to bring his entire Harry Potter collection to school in his back pack. This represents an alarming trend in page-count injuries affecting younger and younger kids. It used to be only Robert Jordan fans who got hurt.)

The next ten years should be just as exciting, especially when a wave of adult authors dives into YA novels, allowing teens to share the joys of deciphering enigmatic references, plotless meanderings, epiphanies by the cart load, and the many other wonders of the finest literary and academic fiction. It's about time. There's no reason all of this joy should be the exclusive property of New Yorker subscribers.

Beyond that, two or three decades hence, we'll see the end of the printed word as ebooks take over the world. Or as global warming raises the ambient temperature above 451 degrees Fahrenheit (which, as any science fiction fan knows, is the kindling temperature of banana bread). While the end of the printed word was also predicted by the advent of educational radio, educational television, personal computers, laser disks, computers, and Jim Carrey movies, the prognosticators are bound to be right sooner or later. If not this time, maybe next time.

Some Key People in the Field

(Voice shift alert — I really like the people in the field, so this section might not have quite the same tone as the rest of the piece. On the other hand, I've been known to shoot myself in the foot, so we'll just have to see what happens.)

Between the reader and writer lies a vast array of other folks. Foremost among them is M. Jerry Weiss, who realized that he could slip cleverly into the middle ground by using just one of his two initials. M. (as we like to call him) has a marvelous talent for getting publishers to send writers to conferences at



places we'd never get to see otherwise, like New Orleans, San Francisco, Hoboken, and Toronto. For this, we all love him.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, there's that one guy who has absolutely no sense of humor. His name eludes me at the moment, but you know who I mean. The same guy who's proud of the fact that he doesn't like teens. On second thought, let's just move on. No point making him crankier than he already is. I'd rather talk about those who've chosen the light side of the Force.

And they are legion. The array of folks who promote good books is amazing. There's probably no field on the planet where everyone is so cool.

Wait — it's coming to me even as I write this. Let's bag the descriptions and just do the thing we all enjoy the most: give out awards. But these will be fun awards. None of this stuff about enduring literary value or redeeming social messages.

Okay. The envelope, please. In the category of best hair on an individual over six feet seven inches tall, the winner is Walter Mayes (aka Walter the Giant Story Teller). For best hair, couples division, the winners are Don Gallo and CJ Bott. The award for best drawl on an answering machine message goes to Dr. Pamela Sissi Carroll. (Not that I'd ever admit to calling her office when I knew she was out just to hear that cheerful southern phrasing). Bill Mollineaux wins best punster, in the division of important guys I'm trying to suck up to. (Yikes — wait — I ended that with a preposition. Let's make it "important guys to whom I am trying to suck up." Wait. Darn. That won't work either. Okay — got it — "Important guys up to whom I am trying to suck." There. Perfect.)

Okay — back to the awards. Di Tixier Herald wins the Green Earth award for building her new house out of recycled Advanced Reading Copies (ARCs). The "It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time" award goes to Cathi Dunn MacRae for letting me write whatever I feel like in VOYA. And, in a tightly fought contest among dozens of candidates, Richie Partington wins best grasp of YA literature by a goat farmer.

Seriously, (and I promise that this is the only time I will use that word in this article) there is nothing cooler than being at the ALAN conference, because you are the folks who actually understand what all of this is about. And I was kidding about prepositions. They're a perfectly fine thing to end a sentence with.

Important Journals

This is actually pretty simple. Every journal on the planet is important except for Kirkus Reviews. (The opinions expressed here are solely those of the author and do not reflect the opinions of NCTE, ALAN, USFL, NFL, ICBM, QWERTY, or any other individual, organization, or acronym. Which, of course, doesn't invalidate the likelihood that nearly everyone on the planet shares this view.) While this may seem like

a cheap shot on my part, I'd like to point out that at least it's not anonymous.

Major Organizations

Various organizations exist for the worthy goals of promoting young adult literature, and meeting on occasion at places like New Orleans, San Francisco, and Toronto. (Hang in there, Hoboken; your turn will come.)

The most puzzling group is the NCTE. It's not unreasonable to expect English teachers to come up with a spiffy acronym for their organization, such as BOOKZ or TENSURE. Sadly, it appears that someone dropped the ball. Other than a vague resemblance to "nictate," or "incite," NCTE doesn't seem to resemble any known word.

The International Reading Association, on the other hand, has forced countless writers to follow the statement, "I'm working on my IRA talk," with disclaimers along the lines of, "No, I'm not a terrorist," or "Sorry, I can't give you advice on planning your retirement."

ALAN, with a bit of fudging on the "N," managed to create a reasonable acronym, though nobody is sure whether the inspiration is Alan Funt, Alan Sherman, or Alan Seuss. ALA strikes the eye as a foreign preposition while YALSA seems more like a mislabeled condiment. (I'm pretty sure that at the Texas Library Association banquet, they served Enchiladas ALA Enrique con YALSA verde, but my memory might be imperfect due to an allergic reaction to my fifth margarita.)

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Everything I've Learned about Writing for Young Adults

It's just like writing for old adults.

And in Conclusion

The soup recipe is way too hard. And all that cream can turn a body to lard. So allow me to offer instead:

Chocolate Chip Banana Bread

Ingredients

- 2 1/2 cups flour
- 1 tsp. baking soda
- 3/4 tsp. salt
- 1 1/4 cups sugar
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 3 large eggs
- 1 1/2 cups mashed ripe bananas
- 1 cup chocolate chips

Preheat oven to 325 F. Grease 4 small loaf pans. Stir flour, baking soda, and salt together. Beat oil, sugar, and eggs. Add bananas and beat. Add flour mixture until moistened. Stir in chips. Pour into baking pans. Bake 45 - 50 minutes. Cool in pans for 10 minutes, then remove from pans and cool completely.

P.S. Bye-bye, Dr. Sissi. You done good.

Adolescent Readers *Flip* for David Lubar

Sissi Carroll

With a mind that orbits at warp speed, David Lubar offers readers an amazing gift with each of his books: a reason to have good, silly, deep, full, long-lasting laughs. His newest novel, *Flip* (Tor, July, 2003) continues the zany tradition that Lubar began when he penned books like *Psychozone: Kidzilla and other Tales* (Tor, 1997) and when he took us and with young readers for a wander down *Monster Road* (Scholastic, 1997).

Flip

Flip features 13-year old twins. Taylor is the intelligent student and dutiful daughter; Ryan, on the other hand, cemented his reputation as the family failure when he was only six years old. By chance, Taylor and Ryan discover hundreds of disks that have been dropped by a space craft near their backyard. Ryan learns, by trial and error, that the disks carry powerful magic; when he flips one then catches it in his palm, it melts into his skin, and imbues him with the strength, mind, and talent of a legendary figure from history. While hosting the spirit of Babe Ruth in his long-legged 13-year-old body, Ryan shocks his friends and the school coach by swatting one homerun after another. When the disk that melts into his skin turns out to contain the essence of Queen Victoria, Ryan suddenly develops a distaste for the unruly behavior and unclothed presence of the guys in his gym class. He entertains the school when he flips and absorbs the Elvis disk, and in the book's climactic scene, he settles a feud with the school bully by invoking the non-violent spirit of Gandhi. Ryan knows that if he could decode the odd writing on the surface of the disks, he might be better able to predict what would happen with each flip. Yet the mystery of what will happen each time Ryan flips a different disk is part of the entertainment in this fun and frenetic novel.

David Lubar's Books and the Classroom

Today, maybe more than ever, we need to find reasons to laugh with the adolescents with whom we spend time. That need is a good reason to welcome David Lubar's books and stories into middle and high school classrooms and media centers. He delivers punch lines with perfect timing, but his talent as a writer for adolescents is not limited to his humor. Lubar's books are appealing to adolescent readers—even reluctant readers—for many reasons. They are popular in part because Lubar often plays around with the conventions of fiction, in ways that welcome readers to join in on the fun of fiction. One example occurs in *Flip*, where Lubar adds short narrative "Snapshots" that are separated by "clicks" between many of the chapters; readers learn that these snapshots are the novel's equivalent of a video collage of a scene. These quick shots also give a nod of recognition to the fact that many adolescent readers have short attention spans. Other examples occur in *Hidden Talents*, where Lubar helps readers get comfortable with the school setting by breaking up the narrative text to add clippings of the newspaper ads that are stored

in one teacher's desk, textbook passages, the principal's memos to the faculty, and the class bully's drawings—all items that middle and high school readers will recognize from their time in schools.

In addition to his expert use of textual innovations, Lubar's books are also popular among young readers because they have many of the most important characteristics of adolescent fiction, including subtle positive messages about relationships, self-image, intelligence, and determination into his stories. He recognizes that kids see the world differently than adults see it, and he shows respect for his readers by creating honorable though imperfect adolescent characters. In addition to his talent for creating short, exciting adolescent novels, Lubar is a fine writer of short stories for young people. One of his best stories, "Dual Identities," is included in M. Jerry and Helen Weiss's collection, *Lost and Found* (Forge, 2000). Another, and one that is quite different from most of his work, is "War is Swell," included in Jennifer Armstrong's potent collection, *Shattered: Stories of Children and War* (Knopf, 2002).

Primarily, though, David Lubar's books do appeal to young readers (and older ones, like me, too) because they make us laugh. Lubar has several successful strategies up his sleeve that keep us laughing. Three that have caught my attention are these: First, he tickles readers with the lively characters he creates. One of my favorite examples is Miss Nomad, the free-spirited English teacher in *Hidden Talents* (Tor, 1999), who writes terrible poems, with lines like these: "A single grain of might sand, I hold it lovingly in my hand. Gentle orb, so small and simple...A speck no bigger than a pimple" (p. 48). Second, Lubar causes readers to grin at the unusual yet somehow believable situations in which his adolescent characters find themselves. I cannot forget Chad Turner, who goes into training to work as a dunking booth clown on the Jersey boardwalk, whom I met on the pages of Lubar's innovative *Dunk* (Clarion, 2002). Third, he encourages readers to chuckle as we encounter the shimmies and twists of his stories' plots; this characteristic is obvious in *Flip*. While Ryan is almost obsessed with the disks that give him the power to be other people, he also has to deal with his terrible school record, the daily reports to his dad about his (lack of) school success, and dodging Billy Snooks, the local hood, after he insults Billy's mother. All of this is balanced by Taylor's unwavering quest to do the right thing, earn perfect grades, and make her parents proud.

David Lubar welcomes adolescents into an appealing world of literature. His books and stories make an ideal addition to classroom collections and school libraries. Don't be shy: invite students to join you in reading David Lubar's novels and stories, and take a visit or two to his Website: www.davidlubar.com. You will find links to excerpts from his literary works, as well as links to humor, his biography (your students will recognize Frogger II, the computer game that he created), a schedule of school visits, and — you guessed it — plenty of good reasons to laugh.