

Finding a “Place” in the World of Books, Developing a Sense of “Self” as a Reader:

A Case Study of a Ninth-Grade Student in an Upward Bound Summer Program

This summer, while teaching a literacy class in the Upward Bound Program at Trinity University (a federally funded program that provides academic support to low-income students who are seeking to be the first in their families to graduate from college), I met a ninth-grader (soon-to-be-tenth-grader) named Aurora. Somehow in just five short weeks, she went from saying “I just don’t read, miss,” to checking out six books on our final trip to the library together—barely enough to last her until school started again. Although I’m not sure I can explain Aurora’s transformation any more than I can take credit for it, I think her story is so powerful, it needs to be shared. I’ve woven together Aurora’s comments (transcribed from an interview—here in italics) with my own reflections on what happened. Perhaps somewhere between our two perspectives, you will discover a third story—the story of how you, too, can encourage a student to find his or her place in the world of books and develop a sense of self as a reader.

When I came to campus for the first meeting before the summer session started, I was looking at my class schedule wondering why I got stuck in “Contemporary Literacy and Literature.” I was thinking I’d be lost in that class. Then I found out that my friend Patricia was in the class, too, and I thought maybe it was going to be okay.

When the director of the Upward Bound program at Trinity University showed me a list of the students—ninth, tenth, and eleventh-graders—who had

been placed in my class, I looked at the reading levels listed beside each of their names and caught myself wondering if I could really work the miracles required to bring them up to grade level. But as we discussed the goals and methods I would be using to teach the course, I managed to convince both the director and myself that I was up to the challenge.

My idea for the course was to draw on all the best practices of reading instruction I knew and to give these students the strategies they needed to become more confident, active, skillful, and successful readers. I envisioned teaching students comprehension strategies that would help them navigate the nonfiction texts they encountered in their content area classes, as well as the literary texts they were assigned to read in their English courses. In addition, I wanted to support their growth as independent readers, helping them find texts that would interest and engage them in reading for pleasure and finding personal fulfillment in reading. I hoped to capture this vision by naming the course “Contemporary Literacy and Literature.”

Since I had never tried “Contemporary Literacy and Literature” before—I had only had English classes before—I thought it would be kind of complicated and hard. I was thinking “literature” sounded more advanced than English in high school. And I was thinking my teacher would probably be mean because my English teacher was mean. But she was pretty nice the way she introduced herself, and I guess I felt pretty comfortable in her class right away.

After introducing ourselves and getting to know each other with a name game and other ice breakers, I asked the students to tell me little more about what kinds of things they liked to do by completing the “Activity Ranking Sheet” (Smith and Wilhelm 29). In addition, I asked them to tell me about themselves as readers by filling out a “Reading Survey: What, Why, How, and When Do You Read?” (Burke A47-A50). One of the underlying questions I had stated on the course syllabus was for us to explore the role reading plays in people’s personal and public lives. So I explained to the students that this survey was one way for them to begin thinking about the question, “What role does reading play in *my* life?”

Aurora ranked “hanging out with friends” as the activity she enjoyed most, while “reading a good book” was her second-to-least favorite activity on the list. When asked to rate herself as a reader on a scale of 1-10, Aurora wrote “5 because I don’t read much but I can read long books.” In response to the prompt, “The best reader I know is . . .” Aurora wrote, “I don’t know,” and when asked to describe her biggest achievement as a reader, she responded, “I don’t really read much.” Given a choice of ten different reasons for reading, Aurora chose only two: “I read when I want to learn something” and “I do not ever choose to read.” She cited “lack of time” and “lack of interest” as factors that consistently interfered with her ability to read well and described three goals for herself as a reader: “have more interest in other kinds of books, have an interest to read, and read about anything.”

That survey took me a while to do. I couldn’t really think of things I liked to read. Before this summer, the last time read a novel just because I wanted to was . . . never. In ninth grade I didn’t read a book at all, not one that I wanted to. I didn’t go to the library. If you asked my friends, they would say it would be kind of weird to see me in a library. But now if I did that survey again, I would change some of my answers.

Our course met Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. On the second day of class, I engaged students in activities and discussions about the importance of establishing or identifying a purpose for reading and the benefits of previewing the text. I had students think about how they choose to watch different television shows based on the mood they are in or their purpose for watching. This served as an analogy to the idea of choosing a book that would match their interests and purposes for reading.

Acknowledging that students often don’t have a choice about what they read in school, we also talked about the importance of matching your purpose to the type of text you are about to read—approaching informational text differently from the way you would approach a work of fiction, for example.

We used the analogy of the movie preview to explore the reasons for and benefits of previewing the text (Moorman 28-29). I asked students if they would be willing to pay to see a movie they knew nothing about, and they said “no.” So I had the students collaboratively brainstorm a list of things they learned about a movie from the preview. Then I passed out *Building Academic Literacy: An Anthology for Reading Apprenticeship*, our course text, and had students identify the text features that corresponded to each of the items on their list. This gave us the opportunity to talk about previewing techniques such as reading the front and back covers, title page, table of contents, chapter titles, index, and so on, as well as asking friends for recommendations and reading critics’ comments to see if you would be interested in reading a particular book.

On Friday, I took students to the university library so they could research and locate self-selected texts for independent reading. In the computer lab, I showed them a webpage where I had posted links to a variety of websites on young adult literature including award-winning books, library booklists, and books recommended by individuals, such as Jon Scieszka, Teri Lesesne, and Oprah Winfrey, and groups, such as YALSA and ALAN (see Fig. 1). I asked students to choose at least three books they thought they might be interested in reading, including one they could check out from the university library. Their homework assignment was to start reading that book, give it a “ten-page chance” (Schoenbach et al. 64-65), and focus on previewing to see if the book matched their predictions of would it will be like. Since many of the titles my students were interested in weren’t available at the university library, I had them look those books up in the public library’s online catalog and write down the branch location and call number, so I could check them out over the weekend.

Aurora hadn’t written any books on her list, so I decided to check in with her:

“What kinds of books do you think you’d like to read?”

“I don’t like to read.”

Award-Winning Books

The Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature

<http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/booklistsawards/printzaward/Printz.htm>

The Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal
http://www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/literaryawds/sibertmedal/Sibert_Medal.htm

The Coretta Scott King Book Award (for African American authors and illustrators)

<http://www.ala.org/ala/emiert/corettascottingbookaward/corettascott.htm>

The Pura Belpré Award (for Latino/Latina writers and illustrators)

<http://www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/literaryawds/belpremedal/belprmedal.htm>

The Alex Award (for books written for adults that have special appeal to young adult readers)

<http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/booklistsawards/alexawards/alexawards.htm>

Best Books for Young Adults from YALSA (The Young Adult Library Services Association)

<http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/booklistsawards/bestbooksya/bestbooksyoung.htm>

The Best of the Best from YALSA

<http://www.teenreads.com/features/yalsa-best-of-best.asp>

The Texas Bluebonnet Awards

<http://www.txla.org/groups/tba/index.html>

Library Booklists

The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's Teen Booklist
<http://www.carnegielibrary.org/teens/read/booklists/>

The Internet Public Library: TeenSpace (Click on "Reading and Writing" then "Reading Lists and Clubs")

<http://www.ipl.org/div/teen/>

Multnomah County Library: Adult and Teen Booklists
<http://www.multcolib.org/books/lists/adultlists.html>

New York Public Library: TeenLink (Click on "Books for the Teen Age")

<http://teenlink.nypl.org/index.html>

Teens at the San Antonio Public Library Webpage
<http://www.youthwired.sat.lib.tx.us/>

Click on "Booklinks"

Find Books Similar to Another Book You Have Read

Amazon.com (Search for your book on Amazon.com, and read the "Customers who bought this book also bought . . ." list of suggestions)

<http://www.amazon.com/>

What Should I Read Next?

<http://www.whatshouldireadnext.com/>

Books Recommended by Individuals or Groups Interested in YA Literature

Authors & Books: Booktalks from Scholastic
<http://www.scholastic.com/librarians/ab/booktalks.htm>

Bill's Best Books from ALAN: The Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (Click on "Bill's Best Books")

<http://www.alan-ya.org/>

Booklists from YALSA: Young Adult Library Services Association

<http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/booklistsawards/booklistsbook.htm>

Guys Read

<http://www.guysread.com/>

Lazy Readers' Book Club (so-named because all the books listed are fairly short)

<http://lazyreaders.com/>

Mona Kerby's The Reading Corner: Young Adult Books

<http://www.carr.org/read/YA.htm>

Oprah's Book Club recommendations

http://www2.oprah.com/books/books_landing.jhtml

Outstanding Books for the College Bound

<http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/booklistsawards/outstandingbooks/outstandingbooks.htm>

Pierce Wonderings: Young Adult Literature Recommendations

<http://www.piercedwonderings.nstemp.com/Teaching%20Tips/YA%20Lit.htm>

Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers

<http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/booklistsawards/quickpicks/quickpicksreluctant.htm>

Reading Matters: Reviews of books for children and teenagers

<http://www.readingmatters.co.uk/>

Reading Rants: Out of the Ordinary Teen Booklists

<http://www.readingrants.com>

TeenReads: Ultimate Teen Reading List

<http://www.teenreads.com/features/2006-reading-list.asp>

Teri Lesesne, self-proclaimed "Goddess of Young Adult Literature"

<http://www.professornana.com/>

Top Books for Teens

<http://www.welchenglish.com/top-books-for-teens.htm>

YALSA: Teens' Top Ten Books

<http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/teenreading/teenstopten/teenstopten.htm>

Figure 1. Finding information about young adult books on the Web

Well, okay, but if you were going to read a book, what kind would you choose?"

"I don't know."

"That's okay. Let's see if we can figure it out together. What kinds of things are you looking for in a book? Mystery? Romance? Horror?"

"I don't read, miss."

I decided to give her some space and let her continue browsing the online book lists.

Later, I noticed Aurora was still having trouble finding any books she was interested in checking out. She was diligently reading the critics comments and

Aurora tried to make me understand, "I just don't read, miss." She was the only one of my students to leave empty-handed that day, and I worried all weekend about how I was going to motivate her to find and read a self-selected book.

using Amazon.com to preview the front and back covers and first page as I had shown her, but she wasn't writing any titles down on her list. Finally, after most of the other students had gone out into the library to find their books, I said to her, "I'm glad you're really taking time to read the covers. Are you not interested in any of the one's you've looked at?" Frustrated, Aurora replied, "No. I don't really want a book. I don't read. Can I just do something else?" I suggested that if she would

make a list of movies and TV shows she liked, I would try to help her find a book she would like.

I thought it was really hard looking through the Internet and looking at all those books. I thought some of the books would be interesting because of the covers, but then when I read the back, they weren't. It took me a long time to find one. I didn't really want to do it. At first I wasn't really thinking of what I was looking for. I was just looking at some books. And when you told me to make a list of TV shows, I thought, "What does this have to do with finding a book?" So I just started putting anything down to get a 100. But then when I thought about the shows I was interested in—reality shows—I thought there might be something related to what I watch, so kept looking on the Internet.

All of the other students had checked out their

books and gone on to their next class when I saw Aurora approaching me from across the library. She had written down three titles and needed help locating the one that she had found in the university catalog—*Someone Like You* by Sarah Dessen. Unfortunately, when we found the call number in the stacks, it turned out to be another book with the same title by a different author. As I searched the online catalog in vain, Aurora tried to make me understand, "I just don't read, miss." She was the only one of my students to leave empty-handed that day, and I worried all weekend about how I was going to motivate her to find and read a self-selected book.

In addition to checking out the titles students had listed on their book choice sheets, I also got the books they had indicated as their favorites on the Reading Survey, plus others I recognized as recipients of teen praise and critical acclaim. I started the second week of class by giving students advice about how to choose a book that would be the "right fit"—one that would not only interest them, but also be at the appropriate level of challenge. I used a visual showing the zones of comfort, risk, and danger (see Fig. 2) and explained that we need to be in our "risk zone" in order to improve our skills, whether we are learning to play a musical instrument, do tricks on a skateboard,

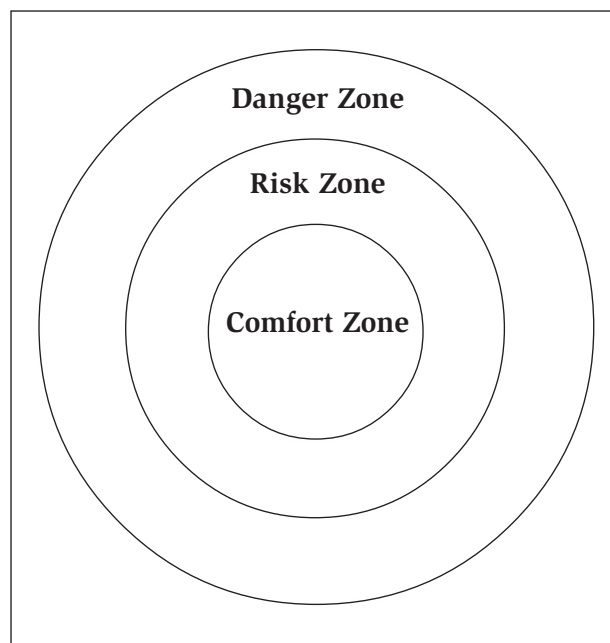


Figure 2. Zones of comfort, risk, and danger from the National School Reform Faculty, www.nsrforum.org

Name: _____

Date: _____

Book Pass Record Sheet

Title: _____ Author: _____

Genre: _____ Challenge: Too easy Just right Too hard

Would you be interested in reading this book? Yes No

If yes, why is this book appealing to you? If no, who do think would be interested in this book? _____

Title: _____ Author: _____

Genre: _____ Challenge: Too easy Just right Too hard

Would you be interested in reading this book? Yes No

If yes, why is this book appealing to you? If no, who do think would be interested in this book? _____

Title: _____ Author: _____

Genre: _____ Challenge: Too easy Just right Too hard

Would you be interested in reading this book? Yes No

If yes, why is this book appealing to you? If no, who do think would be interested in this book? _____

Figure 3. Handout for book pass activity

or develop as readers. Then I taught them the “five-finger method” (Robb 198) or “rule of thumb” (Atwell 40) for determining a book’s difficulty level and had them engage in a book pass activity (Allen; see Fig. 3) to browse and preview all the books I had brought back from the public library. I had identified the books students requested with their names on heart-shaped sticky notes, and labeled those students had said were their favorites with “Juan recommends” and so forth.

Aurora took home four books that day: *Someone Like You* and *Dreamland* by Sarah Dessen, *So B. It* by Sarah Weeks, and *The Simple Gift* by Steven Herrick.

I did find one on the Internet—Someone Like You—that the back cover was interesting, and it was a good book. And when I saw Dreamland, I thought it was going to be a dumb book. But I guess you can’t really judge a book by its cover because that was a really good book.

I guess I like books that involve real-life problems like relationships and stuff and problems that happen to other people. Sometimes books give you solutions that you can use for your own life purposes. I think most of the people I hang out with probably would like those books, too, but they don't read either. I guess if it was a really good book that I liked, I would tell them about it, and they would probably read it.

I explained to the students that I expected them each to finish at least one book by the end of our summer session, four weeks away. I asked them to keep track of their daily reading on a Reading Log (Gallagher 175), which I checked regularly. As part of their final exam, I told students we would be having a “book talk” in which they would tell me about their book. During the book talk, I would also open to a page, read from the text, and ask them to explain that selection to me in the context of the rest of the story. I had a student volunteer model the book talk with me, so the other students would know what to expect. And I encouraged them to do their book talks as soon as they finished their books, rather than waiting until the last week of the summer.

To my surprise, at the end of that second week, Aurora arrived early to class and announced that she had finished *Someone Like You*.

“Hey, I finished that book.”

“Great! When do you want to do your book talk?”

“Today, because I'm already reading the next one, and I don't want to get it confused with the other one.”

So while we were on a field trip to a nearby university, Aurora sat with me on the bus for a few minutes and told me about her book. When we came to a stop light, she moved back to sit with her friends, and I heard one of them ask, “Why were you sitting up there?” Aurora replied, “just talking to my teacher.” In our end-of-the-summer interview, I asked Aurora why she thought she had finished *Someone Like You* so fast.

When I was reading it, I stopped at the part when the boy got in a motorcycle accident. But I wanted to find out what happened, so I kept going. And it just

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got more interesting, so I wanted to finish it.

The following Wednesday morning, I saw Aurora sitting in the lobby reading *Dreamland* before class. Since most of my other students weren't even halfway finished with their first book, I excitedly told the Upward Bound director about Aurora's progress. While I was getting things organized in the classroom, Aurora came in before any of the other students had arrived.

“I'm reading that other book.”

“Yeah, I noticed you're more than halfway through already.”

“But I'm not really a reader. It's

not like I'm a big library person or anything.”

I was struck by Aurora's response, and I wondered if the director had said something to her about my excitement that morning (she hadn't). Since Aurora seemed to be rejecting the idea of identifying herself as a reader, I worried that praising her too much might backfire and stop her from reading more. When I asked in the interview about why she had said “I'm not really a reader,” Aurora explained:

“Even though I've been reading, I'm still not really a book person. It's not like when I'm bored, I would just pick up a book or something. I would probably do something else because I'm not a reading person. I don't read because I'm bored; I only read if I'm interested to find out what happens next.”

“So even though you read three books in three weeks, you still don't think of yourself as a reader?”

“To me a reader is a person who reads books more often than I do. Reading to me is kind of rare. Like to everybody else, they don't think I'm a reader. One day my friend Amber came to my house and said, ‘What are you doing?’ I said, ‘Just reading a book.’”

“Did you worry that she might think you were uncool?”

“No, I don't care because the book was good enough, so I wanted to read it. If I really want to read, I'm going to read. It just depends on the book.”

“So if I, as your teacher, made a big deal about you reading and told you how proud I was of you, how would that make you feel? How would you react?”

“I would probably just read more because I like to impress teachers and show them I’m smart.”

By the following Monday, Aurora had started reading *So B. It*. And after finishing a book each week for three weeks in a row, she finally started *A Simple Gift* by Steven Herrick. But unlike the first three—realistic fiction narrated by teenage girls—*A Simple Gift* is a novel in verse written in three different voices.

I stopped reading that one. I didn’t want to finish it. There were two sides of the book, one was Billy and one was the girl, but I didn’t really know that, so it was confusing. Then there was a point where I looked at the top and saw “Billy” and I noticed that it was changing between a boy and a girl. But I didn’t really want to reread anything, so I just stopped.

Aurora’s favorite books of the summer were the two by Sarah Dessen. I asked her why she liked them so much.

“I guess it’s because some of the characters kind of relate to me. I like to imagine being in their position and think about what would I do and what they did. I just like those kinds of books with characters who are real people to you.”

“What did you think about *So B. It*?”

“It was okay, but not as good as the other ones.”

“Why not?”

[pauses to think, struggling to find the words] “You know how you told us to make predictions when we read? Well, I was making predictions, and they were always coming true.”

“Oh, it was too predictable! That’s a really good reason not to like a book because if you already know what’s going to happen, it’s not that interesting, is it?”

“Yeah, it was like one of those books that you already know the ending.”

“So would you say you like to read books with surprises?”

“Yeah.”

“What else would you look for in a good book?”

“I just think books are better

when there are people in them that relate to me and to the friends I have at school and at my apartments.”

“That’s a really important insight about what kinds of books you like best. What else did you discover about yourself as a reader this summer?”

“That I can actually read pretty fast.”

“Did that surprise you?”

*“Yeah, because I don’t really like to read books. And there was that one I didn’t really want to finish, so I was pretty slow at that one. These books [pointing to *Someone Like You*, *Dreamland* and *So B. It*] I finished pretty fast because I was really interested in them.”*

“Did you discover anything else about yourself as a reader?”

“Well, I wasn’t that good of a reader before this class. There was one point when I used to read some books during my free time, like when I was in middle school. Then I bought all these books, but I didn’t read them, so I gave them away. I guess that’s when I stopped reading books—about sixth or seventh grade. But now I think I’m a good reader. This time I understand more, and I kind of have more interest in books. I feel like I can explain what I’m reading. I can tell people about it, what the whole story is about. Like,

one day in class I was giving a “book talk” about my book to Joe (another student in the class,) and he was interested in my book, so he was looking for it.”

“What else did you learn this summer?”

“I just got more interested in books, so I was reading more. Sometimes at home, I would just have the TV on mute and I would sit there and read for a while. This summer was the most books I’ve read in that amount of time, in a row. So I guess it just made me think that there are more good books like that out there.”

“So was there anything about our class this summer—anything I did or maybe something I didn’t do—that helped you get interested in reading again?”

“Yeah, you looked for books for

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me. Because when I look for books, I can't really find them. I mean I still got to choose which ones I liked, but you helped me. You picked certain books for me, so I kept reading them. Also the reading log made me want to finish the whole thing. And I knew I was going to do the book talk, so I knew what to expect."

"So what advice would you give teachers who want their students to like reading?"

"They should have everyone talk about their books. But people don't like to stand up in front of the class. So maybe the students could sit in a circle and go around and tell about what they're reading. Also, teachers should pick really good books when they make us read, so we'll actually want to read them. Teachers should find out more of what their students are about—what they like and things they do. So then maybe if they want to help the student find a book, it would kind of relate to the student. If there was a kid who liked sports, he would like a sports book, and a girl who is a "drama queen" would like books with lots of drama. Kids would read more books if they knew that it was about them, that it related to their lives."

"What do you think would be the best way for teachers to find out what their students are interested in?"

"They could let them have a journal, and write about things like what you did this weekend, or just let them write a page about themselves."

"So do you think the kind of books you like are part of your personality, part of who you are? What do you think these books say about you?"

"Yeah, because I can relate myself to the characters. Like I think of myself as having determination, and in *So B*. It she has the confidence to go somewhere just to find out about her mom's lifestyle. And I do want to go far with things, like if I wanted to find something out, I would. Also I want to help people, and in *Someone Like You*, her best friend helps her with the baby, which is pretty much what I would do.

"So what advice would you give teachers who want their students to like reading?"

"They should have everyone talk about their books. But people don't like to stand up in front of the class. So maybe the students could sit in a circle and go around and tell about what they're reading."

I'm helpful like that character. And her younger sister wants to go a different way, you know, do her own thing. And that's how I want to be, to be the one person in my family who goes to college, and make a difference—something that no one's done before."

"Besides relating to the characters, what else do you think teens look for in a good book?"

"Just like adults would rather read their kinds of books, teens would be better off with books that sound like the way other teens talk. We like stories where it's like the kids wrote the book themselves, where kids are telling their own story. When an adult is telling the book, it feels like parents telling you what to do. But teens are more sociable with teens, and adults are more sociable with adults. There's a lot of social things going on with teens, and it's good if they have

somebody that's around their age telling them their story. When it's from an adult point of view, it sounds like an adult wrote that book. But a teen book should make you think they're like a teenager who just wrote their life story out to you."

"So teens feel more at home when they're reading a book written in the voice of a teen?"

"More comfortable, because we can say, 'Yeah, okay. I know what you're talking about. I went through that too. I'm in the same position, but what did you do?' We want something realistic to the teen's experience."

As I was driving Aurora home after this interview, I offered to take her to the library. I knew she was leaving the next day for an Upward Bound trip to New Orleans, and I thought she might want a new book to read on the bus. She said she would like that, so we went to the small branch library near her apartment complex and spent about forty-five minutes exploring their young adult collection. At first we looked for more titles by Sarah Dessen, but they didn't have any. So Aurora began browsing, and I scanned the shelves for books I thought might appeal to her. Periodically, I

would bring a book over and place it on her pile. Aurora carefully considered each one, examining the front and back covers and thoughtfully reading the first page or two before making her decisions. She rejected some of the books I offered and accepted others. In those silently shared moments, it seemed to me that Aurora had found her place in the world of books and developed a sense of herself as (dare I say it?) a “reader.”

Honor Moorman is a faculty member of the Department of English at Texas State University. She teaches English methods courses and mentors student teachers in secondary English. Honor is also a teacher consultant with the San Antonio Writing Project, the newsletter editor for the San Antonio Area Council of Teachers of English, and the associate editor for Voices from the Middle. This article is based on her work as an instructor for the Upward Bound Program at Trinity University. Honor previously taught English at the International School of the Americas and served as a secondary literacy specialist for the North East Independent School District in San Antonio. She can be reached at hm16@txstate.edu.

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ALAN Foundation Research Grants

Members of ALAN may apply to the ALAN Foundation for funding (up to \$1,500) for research in young adult literature. Proposals are reviewed by the five most recent presidents of ALAN. Awards are made annually in the fall and are announced at the ALAN breakfast during the NCTE convention in November. The application deadline each year is **September 15th**.