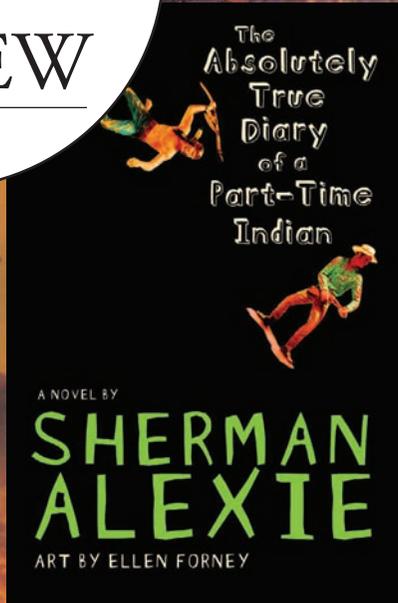
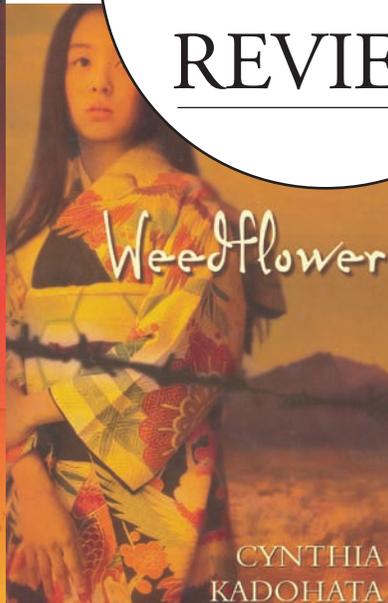
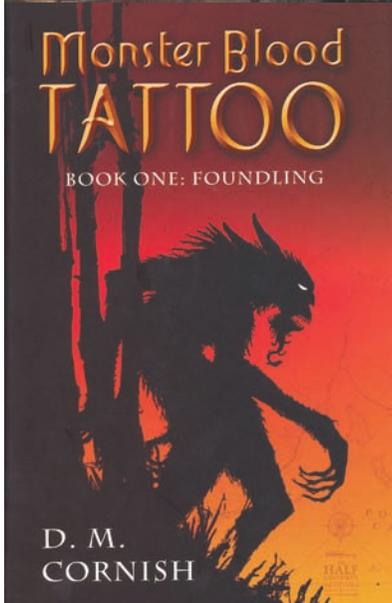


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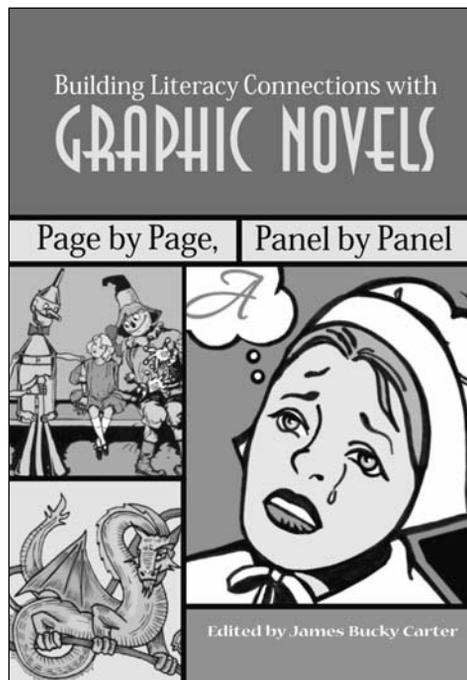
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**THE ALAN REVIEW** publishes reviews of and articles on literature for adolescents and the teaching of that literature: research studies, papers presented at professional meetings, surveys of the literature, critiques of the literature, articles about authors, comparative studies across genre and/or cultures, articles on ways to teach the literature to adolescents, and interviews of authors.

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**PREFERRED STYLE.** Manuscripts should usually be no longer than fifteen double-spaced, typed pages. A manuscript submitted for consideration should deal specifically with literature for adolescents 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 adolescents 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."

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<b>FALL ISSUE Deadline:</b>	<b>MAY 15</b>
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## From the Editors

One of the most outstanding qualities of the genre of young adult literature today is its ability to offer an opportunity for all teenagers to fit in—to find their place and their story. In our summer issue, with the theme of “Life at My House: Depictions of Family in Young Adult Literature,” we provide connections between young adult literature and teens’ daily lives in a world filled with diversity.

Elaine J. O’Quinn kicks off the summer issue with “Where the Girls Are”: Resource and Research,” an examination of the connection between adolescent girls and their world. O’Quinn discusses research involving a deeper exploration of that world, including the literature and the social pressures that exist.

Author Jen Bryant shares how her writing has evolved, as part of Jean E. Brown’s interview. Bryant discusses her novels written in poetry form, including her latest, *Ringside, 1925*, historical fiction about the Scopes Trial regarding the legality of prohibiting the teaching of evolution. Jen returns to historical fiction to tell the story of the Scopes “Monkey” trial to test the legality of the Butler Act of Tennessee designed to prohibit the teaching of evolution.

“Louis Sachar’s *Holes*: Palimpsestic Use of the Fairy Tale to Privilege the Reader” by Laura Nicosia encourages scholars to look beyond simplistic and limiting genre classifications and approach *Holes* and other quality young adult literature through critical inquiry and theoretical exploration. Nicosia asserts that such YA literature is up to the task and ripe for such an examination.

Ruth Caillouet tackles literature censorship in the classroom in “Dixie Chicks, Scrotums, Toni Morrison, and Gay Penguins: Homosexuality and Other Class-

room Taboos.” While censorship issues have been raised about various topics, homosexuality remains a lightning rod for such complaints. But, she states that educators must lead the charge in bringing quality literature into the classroom based on their expertise of what the students need.

In a topic more close to home, father/child issues are addressed in Zu Vincent’s “The Tiny Key: Unlocking the Father/Child Relationship in Young Adult Fiction.” The author examines that relationship, as expressed in various young adult novels.

“Stories of Teen Mothers: Fiction and Nonfiction” by Cynthia Miller Coffel shares an update on a previous article regarding teenage mothers. She details a book club that focused on teen parenthood and the responses those attending had to the literature.

In another article, Katherine Mason writes of “Creating a Space for YAL with LGBT Content in Our Personal Reading: Creating a Place for LGBT Students in Our Classrooms.” She emphasizes that such literature in the classroom will not only help those questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, but also provides others an opportunity to understand a new perspective.

Sally Lamping and Brett Beach follow with “Minding the Cover Story: Boys, Workshop, and Real Reading.” Lamping and Beach discuss the use of reading workshops to help students discuss literary works, but also provide an opportunity for dialogue about their own lives.

A panel of authors—Lisa Scherff, Isabel Arteta, Chad McGartlin, Kristin Stults, Elizabeth Welsh, and Charles White—discuss the value of memoirs in the classroom in “Teaching Memoir in English Class:

Taking Students to *Jesus Land*.” They provide an in-depth discussion in support of using the memoir *Jesus Land* in the classroom, despite its controversial issues.

And, finally, M. Jerry Weiss provides “The Sounds of Stories” in his regular Publishers Connection column. He recommends several audiobooks that bring some amazing stories to life.

But that’s not all. Don’t forget the *Review* regular features, such as 31 book reviews of the latest in young adult literature. We encourage you to become a part of our team of readers. Additionally, be sure to check out the ALAN research grants and Gallo grants

which provide a variety of opportunities for professional development. And note the call for manuscripts for upcoming issues, as well as other possibilities for involvement in the ALAN organization.

As summer slips by, we hope you’ll take this opportunity to generate even more connections for young people. Flip through the pages of *The ALAN Review*, and make note of some ways to help adolescents find that their families—whatever the definition—have a vital place in young adult literature. Enjoy the issue—and, hopefully, restful summer.

## Call for Manuscripts

### **2009 Winter Theme: Negotiations and Love Songs: The Literature of Young Adults**

This theme is intended to solicit articles about young adult literature, authors, and instructional approaches that deal with the relationships that develop among young people, the things they love and how they navigate and negotiate the way to their heart’s desires in the world. This theme is meant to be open to interpretation and support a broad range of subtopics. General submissions are welcome, as well. **October 15 submission deadline.**

### **2009 Summer Theme: A Different Way: Innovative Approaches to the Writing and/or Teaching of Young Adult Literature**

This theme is intended to solicit articles about young adult literature, authors, and instructional approaches that attempt to take the genre in new directions. This might include, but not be limited to, connections to new literacies, subject matter that has previously been absent or scarce in YAL, or formats/subgenres that are expanding the YAL genre. This theme is meant to be open to interpretation and support a broad range of subtopics. General submissions are welcome, as well. **January 15 submission deadline.**

### **2009 Fall Theme: Growing Up: Young Adult Literature Gaining Stature at the High School Level**

This theme is intended to solicit articles about young adult literature, authors, and instructional approaches that illustrate the value of using young adult literature in the high school setting. This might include, but not be limited to, the exploration of specific titles and themes linked to areas of the high school curriculum, the examination of successful implementation of YA into current classes, the value of YA literature in Advanced Placement coursework and as a bridge to college literature studies. This theme is meant to be open to interpretation and support a broad range of subtopics. General submissions are welcome, as well. **May 15 submission deadline.**

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## "Where the Girls Are":

### Resource and Research

For more than a year now, there has been a rash of bad publicity surrounding texts for teenage girls because of Naomi Wolf's public attack on Alloy Entertainment's series books like *Gossip Girls* and the *A-List*. Some argue that these books break faith with what they believe makes Young Adult Literature valuable, and in many ways they are correct, as these books clearly fall more into the romance novel category than the YAL category. However, as those who study YAL know, these texts constitute just one example of the books available to young women. Reasons for supporting their continued publication are more complex than they at first appear and have as much to do with encouraging reading as allowing girls to vicariously work through issues and situations that in many ways do apply to them. I suggest a deeper investigation of these texts is cause to aggressively question the material values and male-centric images of teen girls represented in the larger society, as opposed to questioning the value of YAL, something I wish Ms. Wolf had spent more time examining in

her statements in the *NYT* book section and on the Oprah Winfrey Show. Ms. Wolf's criticisms aside, it is not news that socio-cultural context influences literature written for girls. Recall that *Little Women* and *Elsie Dinsmore* came out the same year, despite having very different perspectives on who girls are and who others think they should be. Both have been in continuous publication while serving the reading interests of quite diverse groups. The struggle for the minds, bodies, souls, and, I might add, pocketbooks, of girls is a long one; in part, Ms. Wolf's comments make it clear the fight continues.

Of more critical interest to those who study girls or who just generally care about their well-being, should be the questions and issues that Ms. Wolf's critique raises that move beyond the texts: What is the influence of culture and society on girls? How are myths of what it means to be a girl perpetuated through texts? What power does the imposed positioning of girls actually have on them? How do girls fare in a social environment that is so clearly in competition for

their attention? How do portrayals of girls ultimately influence their choices? Where are the divides between girls' lived experiences and the fictional representations of them? Missing in Wolf's conversation is a balanced consideration of the texts in which young female protagonists courageously work through complicated life experiences rather than simply enacting superficial social norms in a limited context. Had she shown she was aware of more than just the stories that sensationalize the lives of some girls in some environments, she would have better served everyone concerned, including the girls themselves. To define and condemn the reading habits of girls through such limited examples is to determine a very narrow view of who they are and who they may be.

Although our interest in how "realistically" girls are represented and treated in the books teens read is important, we should also take care to note the social realities that, like it or not, form those impressions. From girls' relationships to themselves, to how they attend to others, to public and private perceptions, it is critical that those

of us who teach, study, work, and live with girls understand the varying and complicated structures that have held and continue to hold them in place. It is also imperative that we note the oppressive forces from which they have managed to break free. Many images we have of girls that we tend to think of as a thing of the past continue to impact their young lives today, and more social constructs than we realize still determine to a large degree what constitutes an appropriate girlhood experience. In a sense, Ms. Wolf's argument against the aforementioned texts is undermined by her reference to the more traditional "girls" texts (Austin, Alcott) that she considers edifying. Other readers may not see her recommendations quite the way she does. On the one hand, her ideal of texts that uphold a particularly pleasing image of girlhood, while admirable at some levels, might be found limiting and stifling at others. Just as the *Gossip Girls* represents a cultural niche that is somewhat alien to me (not totally, I might add, since I participate in the consumer culture referenced throughout), so might the texts Ms. Wolf applauds feel equally alien to a wide host of girl readers for any number of reasons. The point here is that no one book will satisfy the reading needs, desires, and pleasures of all.

Most of us interact with girls on a daily basis, but Wolf's concerns make me wonder how much we actively think about those girls as both pawns and agents in evolving perceptions of adolescence and gender in American culture. How DOES the presence of girls in unsanctioned roles and situations

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**To make gains in our understandings of how to best allow girls to thrive, we must have a clear picture of how they have been continuously envisioned and manipulated by any variety of forces.**

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continue to impact socio-cultural thinking and popular culture trends? To make gains in our understandings of how to best allow girls to thrive, we must have a clear picture of how they have been continuously envisioned and manipulated by any variety of forces, as well as how they have imagined and enacted their own sense of personhood despite these forces. A review of some contemporary resources that locate images of girls in text, media, and a material culture context will greatly expand our insight as to why girls choose texts as varied as those from the *Clique* series to *Angus, Thongs, and Full-Frontal Snogging* to *Stargirl*. This investigation should prove fruitful in filling out our thinking of how girls are portrayed in the literature that is written for them and how they respond to those portrayals.

Numerous books exist that provide a foundational understanding of the history of adolescence in America, including the popular *A Tribe Apart*, by Patricia Hersch, and Thomas Hines' *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*. The one,

however, that I find accessible for a quick overview of what charts the most comprehensive story of adolescence is *Teenagers: An American History*, by Grace Palladino. This well researched and readable text introduces useful concepts for further study that frequently have been applied to gender specific trends by various scholars and writers. It is a must read for anyone trying to get at the breadth and depth of teen culture. A few of the issues Palladino covers that apply specifically to the lives of girls include: the economics of girlhood; the commercial sexualization of girls; girls as proponents of popular culture, as mass media consumers, as juvenile delinquents, and as individuals determined to define a culture of their own. It is my intent to explore briefly texts that connect to these concepts and suggest what they might contribute to our work as teachers, scholars, parents, friends, and advocates of girls.

Recently, a graduate student of mine was transcribing some notes for me from Joan Jacobs Brumberg's *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*. He told me that as he began the work, he thought he would simply skim through my notes and type them up. However, as he started to read about what girls give up and must negotiate in the name of their bodies, he became interested enough to read Brumberg's book cover to cover. The end result, he said, was mind-boggling. What he had in the past attributed to "hormones and phases" was quickly replaced with concrete evidence of what consumerism, social pressure, and the era changes

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## Girls once concerned with mere pimples and “baby fat” are now faced with dermabrasion and even plastic surgery.

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from a repressive society to an obsessive one has actually cost girls. Brumberg’s work deepens the issues attended to in many YA texts, but especially those that concern themselves with body image. Characters in *Perfect*, *Life in the Fat Lane*, and *Fix* take on added dimensions as we begin to understand how girls once concerned with mere pimples and “baby fat” are now faced with dermabrasion and even plastic surgery. From breasts to thighs, from smoking to dieting, from sexual pressure to sexual freedom, Brumberg directs readers toward the battleground that girls’ bodies are and have been for a long time. Because their bodies are always at the forefront of how others perceive them, it is critical that we consider what this means to girls in more than a merely speculative way. Certainly, this kind of awareness about girls and their bodies can help us have conversations about situations in books like *Gossip Girls* that allow us to meaningfully question how some girls view their bodies and what they represent, rather than simply dismissing the characters in the books as poor role models with unhealthy ideals of femininity.

Double standards have a long and documented history, but I fear we may have become so comfort-

able in accepting they exist, that we truly forget the harm they continue to cause. *Slut!: Growing Up Female with a Bad Reputation* by Leora Tanenbaum explores important ground in broadening the scope of what labels mean to girls. Once “named” a slut herself, Tanenbaum looks at the stories of how good girls are stereotyped in this destructive manner for any number of reasons, some more vicious than others (*Story of a Girl*). After sharing her own story, Tanenbaum exposes the socio-historical roots of what will later come to define girls as tramps, loose, and outsiders. She further explores how the crime of rape is often turned against girls to become a “she asked for it” mentality that has the capacity to both silence (*Speak*) and destroy (*Inexcusable*). Tanenbaum forces readers to consider the on-going war waged against girls in a never ending attempt to possess and name them. Other texts in this genre worth exploring include *Fast Girls: Teenage Tribes and The Myth of the Slut* by Emily White and *The Secret Lives of Girls: What Good Girls Really Do—Sex Play, Aggression, and Their Guilt* by Sharon Lamb. All of these books can open our eyes to how to better help girls deal with imposed labels and the restrictive norms of female sexuality. They also help readers come to better understandings of the emotions and feelings girls experience around these issues. A book in this category that takes a more academic approach is Deborah Tolman’s *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk About Sexuality*. Tolman strongly advocates teaching girls to own their desires to prevent others from colonizing and labeling

them for their own purposes. Her text is as scholarly as it is engaging, and it takes a stand that enables girls rather than simply analyzing their dilemma.

Other groundbreaking texts that take a close look at girls and work to deconstruct popular cultural images include *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Popular Culture* by Ilana Nash; *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* by Susan J. Douglas; and *Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls’ Culture, 1920-1945* by Kelly Schrum. All three of these books provide insightful analysis of how pop culture has been a continuing influence in both exploiting and defining girls since the earliest inceptions of postwar adolescence. These texts consider everything from literary images of girls (think *Nancy Drew*) to pop stars (dare I say Britney) to movie, music, and television icons. The authors look closely at how girls have been (mis)represented and controlled by the media since the era of silent films to the more recent advent of “girl movies.” They make a strong case for how public mediums have blurred the lines of girlhood and personhood and made it extremely difficult, if not impossible in some cases, for girls to know who they are outside of the culture that grabs them before they are out of the cradle. Schrum’s book is slightly different in that it focuses a bit more on fashion, beauty, and eras, all important pieces to a good understanding of how girls respond to and create trends. The author also recognizes more fully how girls themselves drive popular culture.

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Further, the emphasis on consumer culture and its impact on girls is historically fascinating and crucial to any study of this particular aspect of girlhood. No surprises here as to why Serena and Blair of the *Gossip Girls* have learned to prefer Tiffany's to Wal-Mart and Victoria's Secret to Hanes.

Three texts that take a cultural studies and theory approach to their investigation of girlhood include Catherine Driscoll's *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*; Jiwani, Steenbergen, and Mitchell's (ed.) *Girlhood: Redefining the Limits*; and Anita Harris' (ed.) *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*. All of these texts are for the serious researcher wanting to explore both national and international girl culture scholarship on everything from racism to classism, power and violence, to the expanding theories of girlhood as seen in

disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, and history. Driscoll approaches the study of girls through a Foucauldian lens, arguing that the idea of girlhood is much bigger and broader than the narrow definitions traditionally attached to it. Jiwani, et. al., provide a variety of essays that complicate lingering notions of girls as simply "sugar and spice" and that find new meanings in the multitude of ways 21<sup>st</sup> Century girls have come to define themselves. The essays Harris includes cover everything from analytical interpretations of post-feminisms to research actually conducted with and by girls. These sources are not for those looking for a quick read, but are worth the time spent for the comprehensive and comparative analysis they provide. Between the three of them, the authors have provided a broad spectrum of concerns and considerations for girlhood studies.

As is too often the case in thinking about human groups in a monolithic manner, we tend to lump all members of them together and ignore the fact that race, ethnicity, class, sexual preference, and even spirituality greatly impact the individual and unique lives they know. Some texts that provide invaluable insights into growing up under the gaze of the white, heterosexual, middle-class "norm" while standing clearly outside of it are Iris Jacob's *My Sisters' Voices: Teenage Girls of Color Speak Out*; *Under Her Skin: How Girls Experience Race in America* by Pooja Makhijani (ed.); *Sugar in the Raw: Voices of Young Black Girls in America* by Rebecca Carroll; and *Without a Net: The Female Experi-*

*ence of Growing Up Working Class* by Michelle Tea (ed.). All of these books listen to the voices of girls and women who reflect on what life is like for those who are not white, not always middle class, not necessarily Christian, and not a part of the mainstream culture. If, as teachers, we ever needed more conclusive evidence as to why we should be familiar with texts like *Born Confused*, *Who Am I Without Him*, *Midnight at the Dragon Cafe*, or *Keeping you a Secret*, these books provide that rationale. They remind us loudly and clearly that every day we interact with girls who do not fit the socio-cultural notion of All-American Girl. More than we imagine, girls of sub-groups are left out and their particular experiences and understandings are mostly ignored. As people who care about girls, we must and can do better to encourage and listen to the stories of the lives of all girls, not just those most familiar to us.

A fun but nonetheless eye-opening text for those who appreciate the importance of visual representations of culture is *Teenage Confidential: An Illustrated History of the American Teen* by Michael Barson and Steven Miller. This graphic text contains numerous illustrations that are an excellent supplement to some of the more weighty academic texts already discussed. It proves the point that a picture really IS worth a thousand words as it takes readers from media sweethearts to B-rated thrill seekers gone wild. The emphasis here is on the media representation of teens as rebels and delinquents, but only after juxtaposing that position with the equally dangerous one of

“Kleenteens”. In movies, books, and advertising, girls are depicted as erroneously as wide-eyed innocents as much as they are come-hither sex kittens. From Shirley Temple to lipstick stealing mobsters to man crazed girls of the night and back again to prom perfect romantics, *Teenage Confidential* provides readers with a visual panoramic of bad girls on the loose, as well as going-steady hipsters who know exactly how to act on a date. While on the surface these images seem to serve as mere artifacts, the historical implications of the girls represented are of a more serious nature. When coupled with texts like Mary Odem’s *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* or Sherrie Inness’ (ed.) *Delinquents & Debutantes: 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Girls’ Cultures*, the on-going contesting, commodification, and commercialization of girls independence, “liberation,” and sexuality becomes starkly defined. *Teenage Confidential* brings to life the dense textual interpretations of a number of the other books.

Because many readers really do enjoy seeing historical perspectives through pictures, I would also suggest a look at two of Trina Robbins’ texts. The first, *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of Women Comics from Teens to Zines*, is a wonderful compendium that covers more than 50 years of comics for girls. The first interesting fact that Robbins points to is that girls actually once read more comic books than did boys. Given the messages embedded in the comics she presents, this is not the light-hearted read it might appear. While

delightfully entertaining, Robbins’ text is enlightening, as well, as it parallels the socio-cultural history detailed in books like Palladino’s. Readers find a blown-up concept of girl culture as seen by consumers of comic media. From “Betty and Veronica” to graphic novels like *The Tale of One Bad Rat*, readers follow the trajectory of issues for girls and how they are positioned over time. All readers will learn something of importance here.

Another look at comics that Robbins takes is through the lens of super women. *The Great Women Super Heroes* is a fascinating history of how “powerful” girls have been envisioned by others and what that vision has meant to girls. Beginning, of course, with Wonder Woman who we know is “Beautiful as Aphrodite, wise as Athena, stronger than Hercules and swifter than Mercury,” Robbins invites readers to join her on a lively romp through the female super heroes that girls have turned to over time. Black Cat, Miss Victory, Ultra Violet and, of course, Supergirl are just a few of the many women heroes that girls have known in their reading. These are strong, brave women

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***The Great Women Super Heroes* is a fascinating history of how “powerful” girls have been envisioned by others and what that vision has meant to girls.**

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who are never afraid to use their power, be it for good or evil, in order to achieve a larger end. Robbins’ books are well researched and will surely provide hours of important reading for anyone interested in the way girls might respond to comic heroines who move beyond the current pornographic comic representations of women with super strength and power.

For those with a serious interest in girls and their comics, I would suggest starting with *Wonder Woman: The Complete History* by Les Daniels. This is a beautiful text that traces the birth of this controversial character as she grew from the ideas of Harvard-educated William Marston (inventor of the lie detector) in 1941 to become an iconic figure still replicated and recognized around the world. With her face and image attached to everything from dolls to lunch boxes to a special edition of macaroni and cheese touted by Kraft industries in 1998, this comic book Amazon has even had a US commemorative postal stamp in her honor. Since her creation almost 70 years ago, generation after generation of young women have identified and claimed *Wonder Woman* for their own. The story of why is one that should be of interest to many readers, but is mandatory for anyone doing a serious study of graphic novel portrayals of girls.

A final important text that is the first of its kind is a two-volume encyclopedia entitled *Girl Culture*, edited by Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh. This text is unique in that it includes long and short essays about girls and their culture, as well as shorter entries

about girl specific topics. Covering everything from abstinence bracelets to zines, girl related topics of the past as well as the present are referenced through a variety of artifacts, including books, toys, film, concepts, and subcultures. This is a gem of a find for anyone wanting to orient to the vast array of issues and identities which girls have aligned themselves with and been aligned with over time. If you think you know everything there is to know about the lives of girls, check out a copy of *Girl Culture*. I can promise you that there are numerous entries that will surprise and educate you.

Because girls are present regularly in most of our lives, it is easy to assume we know a good deal about them simply through observation. While this may in part be true, it does not tell us the whole truth of what girls know that we do not, and what they assimilate to as well as rebel against in larger arenas. Delving more seriously into their world helps us decode troubling cultural messages that we might otherwise shrug off as mere youth, allowing us an opportunity to act more aggressively on their behalf and to encourage them to become their own agents of change. As our society has expanded, so too have some of the issues girls face; others have been exacerbated or simply renegotiated into different problems. Research continues to support Bronwyn Davies (1991 2003) and Peggy Rice's (2000 2002) work that concludes texts alone do not change the way girls see themselves in the world. Adults are needed to help girls appropriate some of the

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texts they read, and to do that we must understand the more extended meanings that the socio-cultural practices presented in those texts have for girls. We can only do that if we are willing to read beyond the fiction we recommend to texts that provide greater depth of understanding. If we do this, perhaps we can help girls creatively reinvent the world they inhabit in healthy and meaningful ways.

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## Of Poetry and Post-it Notes: *Ringside* with Jen Bryant

An Interview

**B**efore poet Jen Bryant published her first YA novel, she had already written a number of successful picture books and biographies for young readers. Building on her talent and experience, *Ringside, 1925* is her third novel in poems for young adults (see review, p. 20). Her previous books also include *The Trial* (2004), the story of the trial of Bruno Hauptmann who was convicted of kidnapping the Lindbergh baby, and *Pieces of Georgia*, the story of thirteen year old Georgia who is developing her artistic talent. In her recently published, *Ringside, 1925*, Jen returns to historical fiction to tell the story of the Scopes “Monkey” trial to test the legality of the Butler Act of Tennessee designed to prohibit the teaching of evolution. Using nine narrative voices, she captures the drama, the hype, and the irony of the trial that pitted science against religion.

Her poet’s sensibilities contribute to the creation of believable characters, vibrant settings, and compelling plots. An additional feature is the meticulous research that is a significant element of all of her novels. Readers can expect to be transported to the locale and the period she writes about. After reading *The Trial*, a student said: “She even makes history interesting!” If she can do that for a disinterested



Jen Bryant

student, imagine the benefits of using her books in your classes.

This interview was conducted primarily through email, but also based on conversations with Jen Bryant at Random House dinners at NCTE in Pittsburgh in 2005, Nashville in 2006, and New York City in 2007. You can learn more about Jen Bryant and her work by visiting her website at [www.jenbryant.com](http://www.jenbryant.com).

### Conversation with Jen Bryant

**TAR:** Prior to writing *The Trial*, you were a poet who had also published picture books and biographies for young readers.

**JB:** *The Trial* evolved from a collision of ideas and personal experience. Because I grew up in the town of Flemington, NJ, where the Lindbergh trial took place, I was privy to the actual setting and to its oral history as told to me by my family members. My grandmother and her sister, for instance, remembered running up to the courthouse after school let out to try and catch a glimpse of the Lindberghs, or of one of the many celebrities who attended the trial in January, 1935. Hearing their childhood stories also made me realize how difficult the Depression Era was for most families—and what an incredible experience it was for their

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**I would love to be able to say that my books are well-planned in advance . . . but such is almost never the case; I seem to need to back into them somehow—or come at them sideways from another project or even another genre!**

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little town to host such a world-wide media event. Thirty-five years later, my own journey to and from school each day took me past the Flemington Courthouse, which also served as the county jail. On my way home, I would frequently look up into the jailhouse windows and see what I thought were the inmates moving around inside. It wasn't difficult, then, to imagine myself back in 1935 when one of the shadows might have been Bruno Richard

Hauptmann, the man accused of the baby's kidnapping and murder.

Although I carried these memories with me into adulthood, it wasn't until my late thirties that I began writing a few poems (intending to send them to literary magazines) based on the kidnapping events. As I was playing around with these Lindbergh-case poems, I was also reading some books on the Lindbergh family, watching movies from this time period, and going back to Flemington for family visits. It occurred to me that I'd never read any novels for young adults about the investigation or the trial, so I thought—why not try and write more poems and see if they don't turn into something that looks like a novel? (I would love to be able to say that my books are well-planned in advance . . . but such is almost never the case; I seem to need to back into them somehow—or come at them sideways from another project or even another genre!)

**TAR:** What or who influenced you to write novels for young adults?

**JB:** Jerry and Eileen Spinelli, who have been incredibly wonderful friends and mentors, both read the manuscript and gave it a thumbs-up. Jerry put me in touch with Joan Slattery at Knopf and I've been working with her ever since. *The TRIAL* is dedi-

cated to Jerry and Eileen, and to my friend and poet David Keplinger, who taught me much of what I know about writing free verse.

**TAR:** Did your experience in writing biographies help you make the transition to writing novels? What challenges did you find in writing for a young adult audience?

**JB:** I love to research—which is why, I think, I continue to write historical fiction and biographical picture books. (The poet Robert Pinsky said that real events are frequently more unbelievable than anything you could make up. I couldn't agree more.) My contemporary novel, *Pieces of Georgia*, also includes a lot of art history as well as stories about the three generations of Wyeth painters. So, yes, I do believe that writing biographies helped to prepare me for novels, especially for weaving fictional plots and characters with real/ historical events and individuals. When I start, it's like a big puzzle that looks almost impossible to put together (hence my tendency to back into a book, I guess!) But gradually, as I move along, the story seems to require certain details and information but not others. I gather so much more information than I ever use . . . but I also believe it helps to make the story richer in the long run.

One of my biggest challenges in writing this kind of book for young adults is finding ways to include enough of the necessary information about what actually occurred but still maintain the story's natural tension. The key, I think, is to create fictional teens who have their own compelling voices and let them tell me what to leave in and what to leave out.

**TAR:** Since all three of your novels are written in verse, do you consider yourself a poet who writes novels or a novelist who uses verse? Are all of your drafts in verse? As a poet, would you find it more difficult to write a novel in prose than in verse?

**JB:** I've been trying to figure that out myself! I don't really know. I suppose I just write stories in a way that pays particular attention to rhythm, imagery and sound. Not because I set out to write them this way; it just seems to be the more natural form for

me. I can't be sure, but it may have something to do with the fact that I majored in French and minored in German and taught both for a number of years after I graduated (from Gettysburg College.) So I guess I've always been interested in—and attracted to—the rhythm and sounds of language, as much as by “what happens.” My favorite prose writers tend to be folks who are very lyrical—Annie Dillard, for example, was one of my early favorites. When I teach children's literature, I use Gary Soto's poetry and short stories together to show how language can be used beautifully—and to give the reader that vicarious “you are there” feeling. He's great. I keep his *Collected Poems* on my nightstand.

So far, all of my novel drafts have been in verse. But I want to try and write a novel in more traditional prose; it'll just have to feel right, I guess.

**TAR:** Why did you choose to write about the Scopes trial in *Ringside 1925*? Are you surprised that the teaching of evolution continues to be under such fire? Do you think the latest reaffirmation from the scientific community that creationism or “intelligent design” has no place in the science curriculum will have any impact on the attention the book receives?

**JB:** Again, it seemed that a number of things fell together over time to lead me there. I ran across a lot of great sources for famous trials while I was researching the Lindbergh case and of course, the 1925 Scopes “monkey” trial was among them. My father-in-law loves the movie “Inherit the Wind,” and we would watch it from time to time whenever the family got together. Then there was all that press coverage of school districts being challenged about their science curriculum and how they were being pressured to include creationism in it. It just seemed, at some point, that I couldn't NOT write it, especially since I had already fictionalized a historical trial.

As for being surprised—I've reached an age where many things still awe me, but very few things (regarding human nature, that is) really *surprise* me. In the U.S., our particular Western way of thinking seems to exclude the possibility of allowing two very different kinds of truths to co-

exist . . . rather, we seem to insist on an “either/or” approach, much to our detriment, I think. A lot of it is ego-driven; the need to be “right” slams the door closed so early on other possibilities, other ways of viewing our existence that allows for a wider, deeper view. Studying foreign cultures and languages made me realize that addressing our spirituality, no matter what conclusions that brings, is part of the human condition. Moving forward in our scientific knowledge is also part of human nature. The reality is that so many of our current scientific breakthroughs—including our best cancer drugs, antibiotics, etc.—are based in part on the theory of natural selection. To throw that out would mean going back to the Stone Age in many ways.

That being said, in writing *Ringside, 1925*, I tried to focus on the historical trial as much as possible, and not on the current school vs. church squabbles. I attempted to create characters who would react in different ways to these carefully-watched proceedings and draw their own conclusions.

**TAR:** I remember learning about both the Lindbergh baby and Scopes trials from my parents who remembered the trials from their youth. What impressed me was their point that these trials, ancient history to me as a child, had changed the social fabric of this country. What do you see as the legacies of these trials?

**JB:** These two cases were similar in some aspects, but very different in others. Both took place in small, semi-rural towns during the first half of the 20th century, attracted widespread national press coverage, and remain landmark cases of our

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**In the U.S., our particular Western way of thinking seems to exclude the possibility of allowing two very different kinds of truths to co-exist . . . rather, we seem to insist on an “either/or” approach, much to our detriment, I think.**

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American judicial system. But even though John T. Scopes was the defendant, the Tennessee trial was really one of ideas (one of the most fun scenes in the books to write was where Scopes goes missing and no one really notices.) The Scopes trial was almost like a nationwide caucus because it gave everyone permission to examine their own views on evolution and whether it was or was not compatible with the Biblical creation story. So when you read the thoughts and conversations of the Dayton citizens in *Ringside*, the same sort of thinking and dialogue was happening across the country because of the case. And we know that continues even today, in homes, schools, churches, and in the media.

The Lindbergh case, on the other hand, accused a German immigrant handyman, Bruno Richard Hauptmann, of the kidnapping and murder of Charles Lindbergh's baby son. Hauptmann was very visible in the courtroom and it was his life that was at stake. I can hardly begin to describe here the number of social and economic factors that affected the outcome of this trial (I often suggest the movie *Seabiscuit*, to give students a context for the Great Depression); even now, it still fascinates me. But suffice to say that in 1935, our country was in the depths of the Great Depression, Hitler was on the rise in Germany, radio was at its peak and televi-

sion was being born, mass communication became faster and more reliable than ever, and the concept of "celebrity" became crystallized. Americans worshipped Lindbergh like a god (an aspect of his life he detested), suspected anyone recently arrived from Germany, and became desperate for distractions from their poverty and despair.

This trial resonates with modern kids because it has the same aspects of celebrity worship, ethnic profiling, and media exploitation that we encounter today. I've visited schools where they've spent the better part of the year debating and dissecting the trial, trying to

determine if justice was served. The kids (and teachers) also realize how far forensic science has come and how few tools were available to crime solvers back then. The recent debates over capital punishment and the government's treatment of Iraqi war prisoners make cases like this seem timeless.

**TAR:** Over the years, a question my students frequently ask authors is about their process of writing. Could you share with us the process of the "making of *Ringside, 1925*" as an example of how you work? What made you choose this event? I know you visited Dayton, Tennessee, and attended a reenactment of the Scopes trial; what other types of research did you do? How long was the research process? In writing historical fiction, do you complete the research before you begin to create characters and frame their involvement in the historical events?

**JB:** Actually, I did a lot of reading about the Scopes trial even before I decided to write a novel about it. That reading included the wonderful Pulitzer Prize winner *Summer for the Gods*, plus about seven or eight other non-fiction books and probably twice as many magazine and website articles about Darwin, Creationism, the trial, the attorneys, and the ongoing controversies about school curricula. There was just so much there; I realized how pivotal this trial was in terms of opening up the conversation about science and faith and how conflicted many people felt about these areas. So—the natural tension and intrigue were already available; I just had to figure out a way to present different perspectives on the arguments so that the reader would be left to decide where he/she fell on the continuum of these issues. Originally, there were eleven narrators, but I cut that back to nine, making sure I used—within the constraints of that particular town and the historical era—a variety of ages, genders, educational backgrounds, ethnic groups, and so on.

I enjoyed "speaking" in the voices of these various characters much more than I thought I would. The challenge was to keep building their personalities and their inter-relationships while still moving forward with the actual events of the trial. Plus, as the story grew, I had to keep good track of

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**This trial resonates with modern kids because it has the same aspects of celebrity worship, ethnic profiling, and media exploitation that we encounter today.**

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who had spoken when and be sure not to let too many pages pass without hearing from a character. Those brightly colored sticky notes became an asset in the final months. And so did my husband's pool table!—I would lay out the book section by section so I could see clearly who had spoken, how often, and what part of the story they had furthered. Several times, I just felt perfectly incapable of keeping all of the plot points and characters straight in my mind. But, several dozen packs of sticky notes later, it did work out.

I did go to Dayton, Tennessee, and saw the re-enactment (twice) in the original courthouse. I poked around town, talked to some of the current residents, bought a few souvenirs, and generally tried to imagine what it was like there in 1925. The town itself is still very quiet. As with many older towns, once McDonald's, mini-malls and Wal-Mart's come in, the boroughs empty out quite a bit. This seemed to be the case for Dayton as well, though it didn't diminish the charm at all. The folks there have quite a lot of civic pride. And the exhibits and memorabilia in the Scopes Evolution Museum below the courthouse were hugely helpful.

**TAR:** How long did it take to write the novel? How many drafts of the novel did you write? Do you write every day? How many hours a day do you work?

**JB:** I never keep track of how long something takes me to write because I feel the process is a lot more circular than linear. If I had to say, though, I imagine the actual writing took almost a year. And then, of course, there are revisions, so I guess that's about another month or two of days at the desk. The draft question is hard, because I'm always saving various bits and pieces of scenes and scraps of things . . . so my "draft" isn't what most folks probably think of when they use that term. I tend to write novels section by section, so I couldn't even begin to guess! (Lots . . .) I try to write—and by that I mean work on the next manuscript that's due—for three to four hours each day, six days a week. Of course as other books come out, I'm also doing events, promotions and school visits, so it's difficult to strike a good balance sometimes. When I feel like I really need to finish a project, I return to

my college in Gettysburg, PA, where I hunker down in a dorm or hotel room for several days and just write. There's something about staring out the window at a long row of cannons that produces a sense of urgency; it always works.

**TAR:** Characterization is a crucial key to the success of any YA novel. When you are writing in verse you have an interesting constraint by form. For instance, any back-story, direct description or conversations by or about the character must be stylistically consistent. How do you achieve this? What do you do to build a character? How was this different in *Ringside* than in your first two novels?

**JB:** Great questions . . . hmmm. The truth is, after I am saturated (though far from finished) with my reading and other research, I just start writing in a voice I think might be in that place or time. If it works, I stick with it; if it flops, I try another one. Very unscientific, I know. But I think this part of the process must be a little bit of a mystery to me, too. Where *DO* those voices come from? I suspect they are a mish-mosh of voices I've heard throughout my life time . . . a marriage of quirks and habits, of physical and emotional traits that I've observed in others—and in myself too. In *Pieces of Georgia* and in *The Trial*, I felt like there was a part of me that got into those two protagonists—and yet there were certainly aspects of those girls that came from somewhere else. I'm not sure how it works, but the language itself often leads me to the characters. The more words I can get on to the page, the clearer the character becomes. And—with me at least—I do think that characters emerge from their very particular settings and that their time and place is integral to who they are.

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## ***Ringside, 1925: Views from the Scopes Trial***

*by Jen Bryant*

Reviewed by Jean E. Brown

[Alfred A. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2008, ISBN 978-0-375-84047-0.]

**L**ong before our court system was dotted with cases of celebrity bad behavior, the media cut their teeth on another highly visible court case, the Scopes trial in 1925. The trial was designed to challenge the Butler Act of Tennessee that banned the “teaching of any theory that denies the story/ of the Divine Creation of man/ as taught in the Bible.” (p.12). In her latest novel, Jen Bryant transports us to rural Dayton, Tennessee, where the Scopes trial propelled a scientific/religious difference of opinion into a political/philosophical chasm between the believers of evolution and the believers of creationism that still remains unbridged eighty-three years later. In this novel-in-poems, Bryant captures the essence and the irony of the trial that was more circus than substance when the judge refused to allow crucial testimony for the defense.

In a plan hatched in Robinson’s Drug Store, the town leaders persuaded John Scopes, a high school science teacher, to agree to be arrested for teaching Darwin’s theory of evolution. His arrest means that the town could challenge the Butler Act. The American Civil Liberties Union wanted to challenge the Act and agreed to have the most famous and successful trial lawyer of the time, Clarence Darrow, defend Scopes. The prosecution counters with Darrow’s friend and former Presidential candidate, William Jennings Bryan, a famous minister and orator.

The trial brought the town national attention as well as an influx of people including famous lawyers, scientists, visitors, newspaper reporters, and a needed infusion of cash. By using multiple narrators, Jen Bryant successfully captures the spectrum of ideas, beliefs, and emotions that the trial evoked. More significantly, the trial drew battle lines between knowledge and faith that sparked the still-raging debate.

The nine clear and distinct narrative voices effectively capture the circumstances, the setting, the impact, and the irony of the infamous “Monkey Trial.” The narrators include three high school students: Peter Sykes, a budding scientist with a passion for geology, and his best friend Jimmy Lee Davis, who follows his mother’s strict adherences to the Bible. The third high school student is Marybeth Dodd, who is bright and independent and who recognizes that John Scopes “trusts us to learn both (science and religion)/ and know the difference” (p. 13). The fourth youthful narrator is 12 year-old Willie Amos, who helps his father with odd jobs in their segregated community and dreams of breaking racial barriers to become a lawyer. Additionally, we hear the voices of townspeople: Tillie Stackhouse, who is reading Darwin and runs the local boarding house where many of the people who came to Dayton for the trial stayed; Constable Fraybel, who keeps order and wryly reflects

**TAR:** Why did you decide to use nine very different narrators in *Ringside*? What did you find to be the unique challenges of using multiple narrators? What techniques did you use to establish and maintain the unique character of each? When you have nine narrative voices how do you find a balance?

**JB:** Unlike *Pieces of Georgia* and *The Trial*, which have a single female narrator, *Ringside* uses multiple speakers to tell the story. The subject matter

seemed to require it. The modern resonance of that trial and the continuing controversy about the issues suggested to me that my readers would necessarily fall along a wide spectrum of feelings and thoughts and beliefs . . . so why not represent that spectrum? For each of the narrators, I did do a brief character sketch—but when I look back, I deviated from my original notes in several cases, because the language/voices themselves led me elsewhere (when they invent a GPS for novelists, I’ll be the first one in line!) But I realized that I

the irony of the trial; and Betty Barker, a Christian fundamentalist who believes that anyone who disagrees with her is the pawn of the devil. The Dayton residents reflect the continuum of beliefs and reactions as Bryant skillfully presents the complex issues of the evolution versus creationism debate, both the intellectual and the emotional.

The final two voices are of outsiders: Ernest McManus, a Methodist minister, who traveled to Dayton to watch the trial; and Paul LeBrun, a reporter from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. These two characters serve to report on the trial. LeBrun reports though his news accounts while McManus presents a balanced view between science and religion.

Jen Bryant sets the stage for players to react to the trial and show its impact on the community and the nation beyond in the novel. The multiple narrators describe the compelling events during the trial, but they also reflect the attitudes and inter-relationships within the community. As the buzz about the trial increases, tensions rise, friendships are strained, and family members disagree. Pete and Jimmy Lee find themselves at odds over the issue as do Marybeth and her father. But the trial also opens Dayton to the world that suddenly allows Marybeth, Willy, and Pete to dare to dream of possible new futures with greater opportunities than they had ever hoped.

At the same time, interest in the trial creates a circus-like atmosphere in the town. Reporters from around the country, including a radio crew from WGN in Chicago, arrived to broadcast from the courthouse; religious leaders, scientific experts, and tourists flocked to the town. While the duration of the trial itself was short, it did put Dayton on the tongues of the nation and money in local hands.

would need to distinguish one speaker from another—not only in the way they spoke and how fervently they agreed or disagreed with the idea of evolution—but also in how their “voice” appeared on the page. For a poet, this is just plain FUN. . . Peter spoke in tercets, Jimmy Lee spoke in long, skinny, continuous stanzas, Willy and Marybeth spoke in free verse, Betty Barker spoke in pretty strict meter and rhyme, and Paul Lebrun often gave us his actual (prose) newspaper articles. So, yes, you’re right . . . it was challenging to switch back

Jen Bryant not only captivates her readers with her storytelling abilities, but she also creates a vivid sense of the times by providing us with numerous cultural allusions. With references from George Gershwin to jazz; from Babe Ruth to Gertrude Ederle; and from bootleg whiskey to the Ku Klux Klan, Bryant successfully places the Scopes Trial in a broad social context of the 1920s, a time of change and controversy.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing parts of the book for today’s media-savvy young adult readers is the contrast of today’s tidal wave of media events with the circus-like atmosphere created by the trial. The trial was a national media event with the amount of press and radio coverage and the number of visitors to the tiny rural community. The media coverage of the Scopes trial was an initial step to the ever-building crescendo that is the media frenzy that exists today. This media effect, also explored in Jen Bryant’s first novel, *The Trial*, the story of the Lindbergh Trial that took place ten years after the Scopes trial, provides readers of both these books with insights into the times.

*Ringside, 1925*, as with all good historical fiction, makes the time and events of the book easily accessible to young adult readers and bridges the years by presenting issues that remain relevant today. The debate between the scientific community that supports the teaching of evolution and the fundamentalist proponents of what has now come to be called, somewhat euphemistically, “intelligent design,” continues today. The reactions and emotions that the various narrators express resonate with today’s readers. Because of its insightful exploration of the issues, the book is an excellent addition to any classroom and has broad cross-curricular implications.

and forth, but it also flexed a lot of poetry muscles for me.

As I mentioned already, I struggled frequently to strike a balance between the factual information of the trial and developing the back story and inter-relationships between the fictional characters. In addition, I had to balance the speaking parts themselves, making sure they were somewhat evenly distributed, and deciding who should impart some of the most important details of what actually happened in the courtroom. Those sticky notes,

and my wonderful editors at Knopf, helped to steer my course when the story grew too unwieldy. I'd still be leaning over that pool table if it weren't for them!

**TAR:** In the Author's Note for your first novel, *The Trial*, you speak of growing up in Flemington. The specter of the Lindbergh trial must still permeate the community even now seventy-three years after Hauptmann was sentenced. You also say that the trial has "fascinated—and haunted" you. Did you feel compelled to write this book? How did writing it affect you personally?

**JB:** You're right—the Lindbergh trial does still permeate the collective psyche of Flemington, especially those who have lived there for several generations. As you can tell from my answer to your first question here, it also permeated mine! I recall being afraid, at one point in my childhood, that

someone would come through my window and snatch me away. That fear—I'm sure—came right from hearing people around me recall the Lindbergh baby kidnapping and details of the baby's room and the home-made ladder leaning against the side of the house.

Now when I visit schools, the kids are just as riveted by the details of that crime. Perhaps because it's so basic and so conceivable . . . and yet forensics being what they were in 1932, it's still a mystery to be solved.

They really get into debating the evidence and the witnesses' testimonies. It's great fun, so that's the fascination part of it—depending on how you "read" the clues, the testimonies, and the evidence, and then take into account the national economic and world political situations—you can reach very different conclusions. That natural intrigue was one

of the things that compelled me to write the book—that and my deep familiarity with the physical landscape of the town, which I knew I could make use of in the story.

Even though it's clear that the accused man did not get a fair trial, we can't forget that this was an incredible personal tragedy. One of the things that affected me most while writing this was how difficult it must have been for the Lindberghs, especially Anne, who must have had to handle an awful lot on her own in the wake of the kidnapping and murder. Even though there's not a lot about her specifically in my novel, I developed a real appreciation for her spirit and resilience. Charles Lindbergh could not have been an easy guy to live with and yet somehow she persevered, after losing her first born, to have five more children, fly around the world, write many wonderful books, and maintain a marriage (despite her husband's loose definition of that term.)

**TAR:** *Pieces of Georgia* is the only one of your novels set in contemporary times. How was writing it different from your historical fiction?

**JB:** This is another book I felt compelled to write, though I'm not absolutely sure why. The protagonist is a 13-year old girl who wants to be an artist, but has no money for lessons and no support from her father. I think part of it was that I wasn't a writer until my thirties and I wasn't formally schooled in writing, either. I just had to figure a lot of stuff out on my own and look for good models, which is exactly what Georgia does with her drawing. So—from an emotional standpoint at least, it was somewhat autobiographical.

The book also allowed me to pay homage to the Wyeth family of artists, from which, I believe, in some mysterious way, I have also drawn inspiration. I've read a lot about NC Wyeth and how he worked and raised a family (good material for all working parents) and also about Andrew and how he struggled to become his own kind of artist, while still honoring his father. Then there's Jamie Wyeth—whose work is totally different but equally deep and wonderful. His portraits are described in *POG*, and his "Portrait of Pig" plays a fairly important role in the story.

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And so does the Brandywine River Museum itself. When I was teaching more often at West Chester University, I would take my students there (usually kicking and screaming until they saw the place—then they didn't want to leave!) and give them a number of things they could write about relating to the museum's collections and the three generations of Wyeths. I would accompany them as they toured the galleries and made their notes and it was during one of those times that I began to toy with the idea of setting a YA novel there . . . or at least partly there. Setting is so important to me. I do believe people are products of their settings and the right setting for me seems to generate characters. So that aspect is the same as in historical fiction.

My challenge, really, was to get the characters away from all the technology that comes between people these days—the cell phones, the computer networking programs, the Blackberries. Part of that was solved by putting Georgia on a horse farm where much of the activity is still close to the land and also making her much less affluent than her neighbors and many of her schoolmates. The irony is, of course, that she is richer for having developed an inner life and a true, self-directed *passion* for something, while the over-scheduled suburban kids are just blindly bouncing from one extra curricular activity to another, trying to stay afloat.

**TAR:** How does teaching children's literature have an impact on your writing and does your writing have an impact on your teaching?

**JB:** Well, the biggest impact has been time: the more I write, the less I teach and visa versa. I suppose because I'm pretty intense when I'm working, I have a hard time doing both well. So—now I just teach in the summer, which seems to work well and I don't write anything at all then.

I do love having long class discussions about good children's literature, as well as introducing my students to books written by our local writing community. We read and discuss books by Jerry & Eileen Spinelli, Lloyd Alexander, David Wisner, Donna Jo Napoli, Laurie Halse Anderson (now

lives in NY), Lindsay Barrett George, Judith Schachner, and Charles Santore, among others. I also spend quite a bit of time on poetry—most of that getting them NOT to be afraid of it—helping them develop a vocabulary for talking about it and also a repertoire of poets whom they enjoy.

**TAR:** Your picture book about William Carlos Williams is due out later this year, so what are you working on now?

**JB:** Yes, it's called *A River of Words* (Eerdmans, August, 2008) and it's just off to the printer's today. We're very excited about it. Melissa Sweet did some amazing mixed-media illustrations for that and really threw herself into researching Paterson and Rutherford, New Jersey, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I have never met the illustrators for my previous three picture books, so I'm excited that Melissa and I will both be at IRA this year.

For Knopf, I have a sixties-era novel in to my editor, Joan Slattery, so should be getting that back for some tweaking pretty soon. That one is also set in New Jersey and has some long-ago history embedded within more recent history. But, again, the characters sprung from the time and place and I just followed their voices. I also did a ton of research on the Sixties—which of course I lived through also—and realized what a *huge* decade that was . . . how important and far-reaching all of those changes really were—and are, even today.

**TAR:** What is your anticipated publication date for the Knopf book? Do you have a title for it yet?

**JB:** The projected publication date for the Sixties novel is 2009, but that could change as we're still in the revision stages. Our working title for that book is *Kaleidoscope Eyes*.

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## Louis Sachar's *Holes*:

### Palimpsestic Use of the Fairy Tale to Privilege the Reader

Since its publication in 1998, Louis Sachar's award-winning novel, *Holes*, has received critical attention and popular praise. While marketed as a Young Adult text, it has been alternately categorized as: realistic, a tall tale, a folk tale, a fairy tale, a children's story, a postmodern novel, a detective fiction and an historical legend. Over the years, several critics have commented upon its patterns of archetypal characterizations, and Annette Wannamaker has scrutinized its portrayal of masculinity using literary theory and gender studies analysis. Despite this flurry of attention, little critical consideration has been focused upon the text's layered narrative poetics—the synchronous overlapping of the atemporal familial curse and the folk legend of Kissin' Kate Barlow—throughout, beneath and within Stanley Yelnats' contemporary story.

Sachar crafts this frame tale novel by conflating time periods and weaving oral narratives within the story of Stanley's unjust incarceration and ultimate victory—a fairy tale in its own right. Sachar's use of these oral tales does more than pay homage to a traditional genre. They are neither a cushion to "aler[t] the reader that Stanley's travails should not be taken too seriously" as Elizabeth Mascia says in *The ALAN Review*; nor are they deployed as "an effective means of tackling twenty-first-century issues" as Pat Pinsent suggests of the contemporary use of fairy tales (203). These embedded, intertextual, palimpsestic prequels serve as strategic counterpoints to the immediate story about Stanley's imprisonment at Camp Green Lake. Additionally, they act as narrative vehicles which serve to privilege Sachar's reader *beyond* the knowl-

edge of the characters. These narrative ironies are what I intend to plumb through this essay.

My main intent, therefore, is not to prove that *Holes* is, itself, a fairy tale. Several critics including Mascia and Pinsent have admirably accomplished that task. If the reader, however, wishes further clarification, please refer to these authors.

In short, there are several key characteristics that *Holes* shares with the fairy tale. In the storyline proper, there are magic animals (the poisonous, yellow-spotted lizards). Along with the presence of these magical beings, all three story-times include some form of magical potion or spell (the preserved peaches, dad's anti-foot odor solution, Sam's onions, the songs of Madame Zeroni and Stanley's father). Perhaps the most important fairy tale element is the presence of the two curses (the one levied against Elya and his descendants, the other against Trout Walker and his descendants).

Most of the characters fulfill archetypal roles. Specifically, Madame Zeroni acts as the fairy godmother. The Warden serves as the "wicked" witch who acts as antagonist to the hero figure, Stanley. Kissin' Kate Barlow fulfills the role of the outlaw or wronged woman who seeks to revenge the unjust death of her beloved Sam, the scapegoat victim.

Clearly, Sachar has done his homework in providing a postmodern version of a fairy tale. He is thorough in his construction and true in his adaptation of this classic genre. This is a novel that exemplifies a writer at the top of his craft. Acknowledging these characteristics and accepting that *Holes* is itself a fairy tale that embeds fairy and folk tales within its narra-

tive framing, let us now examine how Sachar deftly intersperses these discrete tales as narrative counterpoints and as asides spoken to a privileged reader and *not* to the naïve characters.

## Palimpsestic, Strategic Counterpoints

*Holes* has been credited as having a complicated and engrossing plot; Sachar's treatment of narrative time and story is ultimately linear—insofar as the book ends at a future point from where it starts—but the narrative is essentially multidirectional, multispatial and multitemporal. Maria Nikolajeva explains that today's young adult and children's literature "transgress[es] its own boundaries, coming closer to mainstream literature, and exhibiting the most prominent features of postmodernism, such as genre eclecticism, disintegration of traditional narrative structures, polyphony, intersubjectivity, and metafiction" (221). From its onset, *Holes* shows evidence of Nikolajeva's portrait of a text that blurs the genre lines. It brings past into present by conflating and overlapping three time periods—telling a triad of stories, using three separate (but related and inter-related character sets).

For those who are unfamiliar with the novel, I will now provide an abbreviated *chronologic* summary of the three counterpointed story lines. In the *distant* past, Stanley's great-great grandfather, Elya, seeks the help of Madame Zeroni to whip up a love spell so he can marry a girl above his station and despite the fact that he cannot pay the bride price. In a variation of the motif of the lover's test, he violates a code of the fairy tale and neglects to fulfill his obligation to the gypsy (never mind the fact that her love spell was flawed). Because of this, he draws a curse against himself and his progeny. This curse has a domino effect for all of his offspring and for those who come in contact with them.

In what constitutes the *near* past, the second story line, Elya's son, the first Stanley Yelnats, loses his fortune to a folkloric hero (who all characters know as Kissin' Kate Barlow). The reader comes to learn her story and how she became the notorious outlaw as the result of a tragic interracial love story. Her deviant career as an outlaw and her ultimate defeat lead to a curse that *she* places upon the family of Trout Walker—the ancestor of the present day warden of Camp Green Lake.<sup>1</sup>

In the *present* storyline, the primary story, the progeny of the past character sets of Elya Yelnats, Madame Zeroni, and Trout Walker (i.e., Stanley, Zero and the warden) play out incidents and events that are the direct but distant result of past actions. Curses are lifted, fortunes are reversed, crises from both the far and near past are mollified, and the requisite "happily ever after" ending is provided. In sum, Stanley's wrongful imprisonment becomes what Tolkein calls the "eucatastrophe," or the "good catastrophe" facilitated by the overlapping temporal shifts and the ability for present day characters to correct their ancestors' failings (Tolkein 68).

Sachar deploys these temporal shifts using varying strategies. Sometimes the turning of a page or a chapter change will signify a shift in time or story. Other times, a peritextual blank space on the page will signal a temporal *volta*. And yet other times, Sachar will simply enjamb shifting times from one paragraph to another, juxtaposed in postmodern fashion. Despite the embedding of multiple times and plots, each character set remains

discrete from the other two sets—living separate lives, enacting separate storylines and never directly interacting with each other. Sachar emphasizes the separateness of the character sets when he humorously says of Elya Yelnats, "He didn't know that he was Stanley's great-great-grandfather" (28).

The contemporary story—that is, Stanley's story—however, is *influenced* by both the distant and near past storylines. Nikolajeva identifies that, "A further development toward more complex narrative is multiple plots, as well as multiple temporality and spatiality" (226). Clearly, with its three layers of storylines and three sets of characters, *Holes* is a modern, complex narrative. Within the first three sentences of the novel, a fusion of times is evidenced. The reader hears about the verdant history of Camp Green Lake—from over 100 years ago—reminiscent of

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**Sachar's treatment of narrative time and story is ultimately linear—insofar as the book ends at a future point from where it starts—but the narrative is essentially multidirectional, multispatial and multitemporal.**

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the “Once upon a time” beginning to most fairy tales. The mention of an historic past introduces the reader to the tone and counterpointed construction of the text. The narrator says, “There is no lake at Camp Green Lake. There once was a very large lake here, the largest lake in Texas. That was over a hundred years ago. Now it is just a dry, flat wasteland” (3). The reader grows sensitized to the past-in-the-present. Stanley may be looking at a dried lakebed and an arid topography. But the reader knows about Green Lake’s recent *geographic* past of lushness.

Sachar manipulates this theme of things, people and events that once *were* but *are no longer* as a recurring motif of the text. Both reader and characters

are always aware that a very large lake once was present in Texas every time mention is made of the dry wasteland it has become. This past is palpably present and coexists with “the now” not despite, but because of, the absences.

Soon after, by page 7, when the reader hears about Stanley’s “no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather,” she has already encountered several “what-if”

scenarios and several leaps in narrative time. Sachar lures the reader back and forth through the present, near and far past in a process of nonlinear narrative accretion. The reader learns how to engage with this text, as if it were a “jig-saw puzzle of a novel,” as a reviewer from *The New York Times Book Review* claims, and to make meaning by narrative multi-tasking—adding details to three stories concurrently. In Chapter 3, for instance, the reader encounters at least eight temporal shifts over the course of five pages:

- First, she hears about Stanley’s transport to the detention camp;
- Second, the reader makes a short leap backward in time to Stanley’s send-off by his parents;
- Third, the reader jumps yet again backward in time and learns about Stanley’s embarrassment at school just *before* the supposed crime occurs;

- Fourth, in forward chronologic order, Stanley is arrested;
- Fifth, the reader leaps to the distant past learning about the curse placed upon Elya Yelnats;
- Sixth, the reader leaps to the present time to learn of Stanley’s father’s quest to find a way to recycle old sneakers;
- Seventh, the reader leaps backward to the near past and the first reference to Kissin’ Kate Barlow;
- Finally, the reader leaps ahead 100+ -years to Stanley’s transport to the camp to fulfill his (albeit) unearned social obligation. (Sachar 6–10)

For the duration of the novel, Sachar presents these time shifts in scatter-shot fashion, with interrelated story lines and creates a palimpsest of narratives. Each incident from both pasts remains in the reader’s mind as she experiences Stanley’s present. The reader juggles the counterpointed events and reconstructs the asynchronous stories in synchronous fashion. She understands how Stanley’s present is not only a response to the past, it also re-enacts key events, acts as a corrective and offers narrative closure to the unsatisfied pasts. Ultimately, Stanley fulfills his great-great-grandfather’s obligation to Madame Zeroni and sets the universe correct. He does this, however, unaware of his karmic implications and clueless as to the events he is setting aright.

## Narrative Vehicles to Privilege the Reader

Through Sachar’s use of the third person limited omniscient narrative voice, the reader learns all that the protagonist and focal lens, Stanley, knows. *Beyond* that, the reader gleans through the narrator’s offerings, the history of the Yelnats curse and an awareness of fate’s and coincidence’s roles in Stanley’s life—elements to which even Stanley never becomes fully aware. Specifically, *Holes* practices a type of authorial privileging of the reader through the embedded and layered use of fairy and folk tales (such as the Yelnats curse and the Kissin’ Kate Barlow tall tales). As a result of these counterpoint narratives, *Holes* fleshes out an ironic narrative topography beyond which the present-day characters acquire. Simply put, as a result of encountering these embedded oral stories, the reader grows to know more than the characters—and she is aware of her privileged status.

An example of this narrative privilege is when the

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**Sachar emphasizes the separateness of the character sets when he humorously says of Elya Yelnats, “He didn’t know that he was Stanley’s great-great-grandfather.”**

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reader learns that despite his appellation as a “no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather,” Elya Yelnats is not a pig thief. His descendants may refer to him as such, but he was *given* the pig by Madame Zeroni as part of his challenge and as part of the plan to help him win the love of Myra. Madame explains, “It just so happens, my sow gave birth to a litter of piglets yesterday. There is one little runt whom she won’t suckle. You may have him. He would die anyway” (30). Clearly, Elya did not steal the pig; it was a gift. The reader is made aware of this fact. The family, however, never comes to realize such a truth. They think, rather, that the curse placed upon their family is the result of some ancient economic crime committed by their progenitor. They have no idea that he defaulted on a *promise* made to a gypsy conjure woman and that *that* was his offense.

This narrative irony is the result of the privileged status of the reader who knows that Elya’s curse is the result of his failure to carry Madame Zeroni up the hill and serenade her with the pig lullaby. This irony also begs the question regarding the function of fairy tales as purveyors of truth: had the family known the whole tale of Elya’s failings as revealed to the reader, could the curse have been lifted sooner?

Besides Sachar’s creation of an ironic narrative topography, he familiarizes his reader with the use of direct address as early as page 5 when the self-aware narrator begins, “The reader is probably asking: Why would anyone go to Camp Green Lake?” Sachar constructs a narrative that speaks through a conscious storyteller to the reader—thereby facilitating the sense of privilege that comes with being in the narrator’s confidence. The reader grows comfortable with direct disclosures from the narrator and benefits from the epiphanies such revelations offer.

In another simple yet profound example of ironic privilege, the reader finds out on page 9 that

Stanley’s great grandfather, the first Stanley Yelnats, was robbed by Kissin’ Kate Barlow. This central mystery to the text is revealed early on to the reader—even before the need-to-know such a fact is made clear. Sure, it is an intriguing and fascinating brush with fame. But, what such an historically fascinating event *means* in the novel is unclear at this time, both to the reader *and* to the characters. Frankly, Stanley’s knowledge of the Kate Barlow encounter comes *after* the reader has been clued-in. The narrator offers, “At such times she [Stanley’s mother] neglected to mention the bad luck that befell the first Stanley Yelnats” (9). Stanley doesn’t find out about his ancestor’s brush with fame until page 10.

The longest sustained example of privileged narrative irony occurs in Chapters 25 and 26, which are entirely devoted to the recent past story of Kate Barlow, Sam the onion man and their forbidden interracial love. The reader learns that Sam was killed for his transgression of kissing a white woman and

that Kate was spared execution and was “rescued against her will” (115). After peritextual ellipses indicate a narrative shift, the storyteller directly addresses the reader with additional information to which no present-day character is made aware. It is learned that after Trout Walker rammed into Sam’s boat out on Green Lake, “Sam was shot and killed in the water. . . . [His] donkey had been shot in the head” (115).

No character in the present tense story learns the details of Sam’s death and Kate’s conversion to outlaw. Neither do they discuss (and it is quite possible that no one knows of) the curse Kate levied against Walker and his descendants: “‘Go ahead and kill me, Trout,’ said Kate. ‘But I sure hope you like to dig. ‘Cause you’re going to be digging for a long time. It’s a big vast wasteland out there. You, and your children, and their children, can dig for the next hundred years and you’ll never find

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**The two storylines alternate in narrative counterpoint throughout the chapter with no segues, no transitions. Rather than constructing connections between the storylines to ease the reader from the present to the distant past, Sachar fosters a sense of rushing urgency that propels the reader from the present, to the past, and back again.**

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it” (122). While the Walker clan has searched and dug for the treasure Kate buried, no mention is made of this as a curse. The warden and others are simply looking for buried treasure. And, while she “was one of the most feared outlaws in all the West,” no one speaks about the facts of their story (115). How could they? The Yelnats family would not be aware of the details; the original Stanley Yelnats entered the storyline *after* Kate’s transformation. Only Trout Walker and his posse know the story and Walker’s progeny, the present day warden, is not about to talk about her ancestor’s racism, jealousy and murderous rage—if she even knows about such traits. This folkloric legend is revealed over the course of these two chapters, and its raw truths are revealed to only the reader—not to the characters.

Besides his use of limited omniscient voice and the employment of direct address, the author introduces the reader to the secondary/tertiary stories and the concomitant conflation of times. In chapter 7, Stanley has his first day of digging holes under the hot Texas sun. With each visual extra space of white on the page, the narrative shifts from present day Camp Green Lake to the old country and compresses the passage of time. Each leap to the *distant* past develops the story of Elya—his agreement with Madame Zeroni and his subsequent flight to America—and the origin of the curse. Each *present* day narrative discloses Stanley’s first day of digging holes.

The two storylines alternate in narrative counterpoint throughout the chapter with no segues, no transitions. Rather than constructing connections between the story lines to ease the reader from the present to the distant past, Sachar fosters a sense of rushing urgency that propels the reader from the present, to the past, and back again. He does this by incrementally shortening the duration of each vignette over the course of the chapter. The initial tale, that of Stanley’s first hole, runs for nearly three pages. Elya’s story breaks in and lasts for just over three pages,

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**What I find even more interesting than *Holes*’ themes and structure is that as Sachar layers these stories, characters and temporal periods, he affords the reader a broader, ironic sense of truth and a greater understanding of fate, destiny, and coincidence than Sachar’s characters acquire.**

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itself. Each subsequent telling—jumping from present to past and back again—lasts for only one page each, creating a sense of rapid counterpoint which trains the ear of the reader to expect a shift in time after brief but decreasing intervals (Sachar 26-40).

What this does, in effect, is blur the line of what is real or now, and what is past or the magical. When a reader enters, exits, enters, and exits the fictive, primary and secondary realms of Elya’s and Stanley’s stories in rapid succession, she becomes comfortable with both narratives and has no real need to distinguish where or when she is at any given moment. Asking the question, “Am I in the present with Stanley now, or am I in a flashback fairy tale from long ago?” is unnecessary since both are

encountered in an active “now.” Such a blurring of temporalities and slippage between genres permits Elya’s past to be *in* and layered *atop* Stanley’s present and allows the magic of the past to permeate the harshness of this present time. To the reader, both stories and times are revealed and enacted concurrently.

## Concluding Thoughts

*Holes* is a complex *present day* fairy tale that frames a *distant past* fairy tale and a *near past* folk legend. Cindy Lou Daniels writes, “Sachar’s plotting strategy within this work is exemplary; there are stories within stories that ultimately fit together like a set of stacking boxes. . . . Critics could not find a better novel to explore structurally and thematically” (80). What I find even more interesting than *Holes*’ themes and structure is that as Sachar layers these stories, characters and temporal periods, he affords the reader a broader, ironic sense of truth and a greater understanding of fate, destiny, and coincidence than Sachar’s characters acquire. Max Lüthi writes, “the fairy tale and similar genres—remove us from the time continuum and make us feel that there is another way

of viewing and experiencing life. . . . the fairy tale, however, reveals [this theme] through its *form*" (45). Sachar's narrative construct establishes an irony that privileges the reader as it entertains. I assert that this intricate craftsmanship merits serious theoretic candling.

If Young Adult and Children's Literatures are to continue making headway against the "theory barrier" that marginalizes both genres within the academy, scholarly critics must be willing to examine these texts with the same literary scrutiny we critique adult canonical texts (Daniels 78). Sachar's *Holes* is one of many notable YA novels that rises to the challenge of critical inquiry and theoretical exploration. This ground is fertile for such investigations. Literary scholars from within the academy will learn that there is an ever-growing corpus of YA and children's texts that not only withstand rigorous analysis, but flourish and grow in their significance as we examine their craftsmanship and explore their intricacies. We must simply get beyond the hierarchical biases of genre classifications.

<sup>1</sup> In what *may* be a further, unsubstantiated but possible entanglement between character sets, Elya Yelnats married an American girl named Sarah Miller (Sachar 38). Trout Walker marries a young girl named Linda Miller (121). Is it possible that Stanley and the warden are related (albeit distantly) through a marriage in the near past?

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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**.

# Dixie Chicks, Scrotums, Toni Morrison, and Gay Penguins:

Homosexuality and Other Classroom Taboos

**"E**verything I need to know about life I've learned by reading banned books" is the line on the button pinned to my denim jacket—a line which always gets attention, questions, and some explanation. Most individuals, including my English Education pre-service teachers, are quite surprised when I list some of America's banned books, and quite a few are even angry. Books are often challenged or banned in classrooms and libraries for language issues, sexual content, witchcraft, and a host of other reasons, and usually it is the teachers and librarians who fight for good literature. Unfortunately, it is our students who suffer. Young adults, especially those who feel isolated or rejected by society, need to find themselves in literature. They need literature for its most basic purpose, connection with humanity. They need to find their place in the pages of books so that they can understand their place in the world. But as educators continue to do their part in opening minds and books, we need to also be aware that censorship comes in many forms, and that we sometimes, without fully realizing our role, are the strictest censors of America's classrooms.

My teacher candidates fear their first years in the classroom, not because of the hard work, overcrowded classrooms, high stakes testing, or threat of violence.

They are afraid of the battles they will need to fight over literature. And even as I equip them with the weapons they need for the struggle—parental permission slips, book rationales, and good planning—they are still afraid. While they understand the need for literature of diversity and are open to including texts of other cultures in their unit plans, these future teachers are most afraid of controversial literature and know that there are certain classroom taboos. They have heard the tales of even penguins causing a great stir in American classrooms, and therefore are especially afraid of literature containing gay or lesbian characters. So, I have begun to see the importance of exploring the role of censorship in the decisions of teaching, especially in the area of gender studies.

My new teachers' fears are well founded in a current atmosphere of American censorship and unrest. Even though the physical act of burning books may not happen as frequently as it once did, books and other art forms are banned or censored every day. As example of this censorship of democracy, we need to look only as far as our local radio station and listen for the Dixie Chicks. What we find is that the Grammy Award winning album, *Taking the Long Way*, and its protest song, "Not Ready to Make Nice" continue to be shunned from local airwaves after controversial statements made

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by Natalie Maines about President Bush and the war in Iraq. Country music stations, claiming to react to fan mail and calls, refused to play the album and protests of crushing CDs with tractors spread round the country. More seriously, threats were made on the life of Maines, all from her simple statement, “Just so you know, we’re on the good side with y’all. We do not want this war, this violence, and we’re ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas.” Similarly, Pink’s song, “Dear Mr. President” is also meeting resistance in radio and television play time. Her lines, “How do you sleep while the rest of us cry? How do you dream when a mother has no chance to say goodbye?” also point to the conflict in Iraq. Many American people have taken a stand against the Dixie Chicks and Pink and their political statements while the airwaves continue to rap with the lyrics of drugs, murder, and woman beating. Censorship in America, although sometimes misdirected, is certainly alive and well. Interestingly enough, the Dixie Chicks are now the highest selling female band ever and have sold thirty million albums since June of 2006, so either sentiments have changed or the censors are very much outnumbered.

In addition to issues of political censorship, teachers are faced with controversy over books with edgy language. “Scrotum” is the word that stirred controversy when the 2007 Newbery winner, Susan Patron’s *The Higher Power of Lucky*, was announced. The word appears on the first page of the book in reference to a story that the main character, Lucky Trimble, overhears while eavesdropping on Short Sammy’s story of when he hit “rock bottom.” “Sammy told of the day when he had drunk half a gallon of rum listening to Johnny Cash all morning in his parked ’62 Cadillac, then fallen out of the car when he saw a rattlesnake on the passenger seat biting his dog, Roy, on the scrotum” (1). Librarians immediately began pulling the book from their shelves when the word came under public scrutiny. Others, without even reading the story, simply refused to buy the book, not wanting to face off against administrators or parents. *The New York Times* quoted one librarian as saying that this is a “good case of an author not realizing her audience” and, “If I were a third- or fourth-grade teacher, I wouldn’t want to have to explain that.” Another librarian quoted in the article claims, “you won’t find men’s genitalia in quality

literature.” Susan Patron, a juvenile librarian herself, responded to the criticism in *Publisher’s Weekly*. “If I were a parent of a middle-grade child, I would want to make decisions about my child’s reading myself—I’d be appalled that my school librarian had decided to take on the role of censor and deny my child access to a major award-winning book.” I still wonder if “scrotum” were on page two instead of page one, would that have made a difference? If Susan Patron had chosen to use the word “balls” instead of “scrotum,” would that have made her book more acceptable? Do we truly believe that anatomical vocabulary is the problem here? Why are there no public outcries against the endless series of television commercials about erectile dysfunction and quality sex that air throughout the day? In truth, most agree that if the book had not won the Newbery then the word would have gone unnoticed. But the word “scrotum” and the quality of this book are not really the issue. When librarians refuse to buy books or purposely keep them off the shelves, they take on the role of censor.

But librarians are, of course, not the only censors in American schools. Teachers must also take credit for the texts they choose to teach and the books they place on classroom shelves. My pre-service teachers always want to know whether I was faced with any book challenges in my twenty years of teaching in Louisiana public schools. My only brush with book banning was when a parent went directly to the school board administrators without discussing the issue with me when I listed Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* as a summer reading choice. I feel very strongly that Toni Morrison ends that book with a plea for us to change our communities and help those young people who are being abused and sexually assaulted. I wanted my high school seniors to think about making our community better than Pecola’s. My supervisor came to me and asked, “Have you read this book?” When I assured her that yes, I was writing my dissertation on Toni Morrison, she seemed satisfied. Since the book was a choice book, there was no real issue even with the graphic incest scene, but I notice that

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**Literature of homosexuality still remains noticeably absent from the middle and high school canon. America's teachers seem very afraid of the controversy they imagine in regard to literature from gay, lesbian, or bisexual perspectives, and these books remain one of the greatest taboos in America's classrooms.**

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this book made the ALA list of most challenged books in 2006. Interestingly enough, all of my students chose to read *The Bluest Eye* that summer, even the one whose parent objected. Today's teachers must continue these battles each day and cannot allow the fears of parental pressure and supervisors to keep them from teaching good literature. We must also continue searching for books that matter, books that can open minds and inspire young people and help them find their place in the world. Educators cannot self-censor their classrooms in fear of controversial books but must, instead, continue choosing books that

matter. While I am certainly not advocating that every teacher take *The Bluest Eye* into the classroom, I am suggesting that we cannot back down from literature that we know is important to helping young people find a sense of "self" or literature that was meant to change the world. The Pecolas of the world need us in this fight.

Even with so many censorship issues, classroom materials and literature certainly seem more diverse now than they were twenty-five years ago when I began my career as an English educator. The curriculum and new textbooks now incorporate more authors from a variety of cultural backgrounds, more women's literature, more non-fiction and other genres, more ethnicities. But there is one area that is not only avoided but, it appears, vehemently rejected by textbook companies and local curriculum designers. Literature of homosexuality still remains noticeably absent from the middle and high school canon. America's teachers seem very afraid of the controversy they imagine in regard to literature from gay, lesbian, or bisexual perspectives, and these books remain one of the greatest taboos in America's classrooms. Four

out of the top ten list of ALAs most challenged books for 2006 were challenged due to homosexual content. But American teens are dying. As long as one of the highest suicide rates among teens continues to stem from homosexual issues, then we as educators must take some responsibility. If we censor our bookshelves and continue to ignore this segment of our population, we are at fault for not only discounting their experience, but we are also failing to improve the often hurtful school environment for these students.

Unfortunately, this is literature that many teachers have never read themselves, knowing only that the issue continues to stir debate around the country. Some teachers fear the texts because they assume that homosexual books must contain sexually explicit scenes. In truth, many gay teen books are much less explicit than heterosexual books, since these authors and publishers are more aware of possible censors. There are also many resources to help teachers and librarians choose quality texts including Frances Ann Day's *Lesbian and Gay Voices: An Annotated Bibliography and Guide to Literature for Children and Young Adults*, but some teachers still feel at a loss on how to incorporate these books into the classroom. Even if teachers cannot bring themselves to face the controversy of teaching these texts, they owe it to their students to read the books in order to better understand the issues. Perhaps the books suggested in this article can be a starting point not only for my first year teachers, but also for veteran teachers who are realizing the need for change—if not in total curriculum, at least in bookshelf offerings. Gay and questioning young adults need to move to the forefront of our "at risk" lists, and they need us to realize the power of literature, a power that may even save a life.

At the top of my list of suggestions for those who are beginning this study is a book that contains one of the best portrayals of young gay love represented through the character of Joe in James Howe's *The Misfits*. This is a wonderful book for teaching teenagers that they do indeed have the ability to change the world, an ability that lies within their daily actions and words. The story follows a group of students who have always viewed themselves as misfits among the ever popular middle school kids who tease them and call them names. The group, inspired by a student election and the chance to make a change, run their candidate on the "no-name" platform in an attempt to

stop the endless bullying throughout the school. Along the way, Joe becomes infatuated with another young man, and their middle school relationship develops by the end of the book. Perhaps it is Howe's likable quirky characters or maybe it is that memory deep inside each of us of the names we were called, but whatever the reason, his novel is truly a joy to read. Joe's homosexuality is part of the storyline, but it is treated like a normal plot line rather than a problem. Joe is not struggling with his identity or sexuality. He is, in fact, more sure of himself than most of the other characters, and that is part of what makes his character important to the genre of gay adolescent stories.

This is a book that could easily be taught in grades six through eight, and because of its easy ties to discussions of bullying and name calling it is a great text for teaching tolerance. It has even inspired a nation-wide trend in No Name-Calling Week with a web site for teacher and student use. Howe has also continued Joe's story in *Totally Joe*, claiming that the character of Joe is patterned after his own adolescence. Classroom activities for this book can begin with journaling about nicknames and then a discussion of the names adolescents use against one another. This will allow an open discussion of the prejudices and hurt that all teens have felt. Students can also write about the issues in their own schools that they would like to fight against. One of the strengths of Howe's book is its ability to tackle tough issues without the use of offensive language or explicit scenes, allowing it to be taught as a "safe" book in most schools.

Another recommendation is *Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence*, a collection of short stories by both homosexual and heterosexual authors written for teens. The book is over ten years old now, but it still holds a comforting position on my bookshelf. Teachers who cannot find the time for another novel in their curriculum might choose one of the short stories here to supplement their readings. Since several of the stories are written by well respected heterosexual authors like Bruce Coville, Lois Lowry, and Jane Yolen, teachers may find some of their students more interested in the material. But the book also contains wonderful selections from homosexual authors such as Nancy Garden and Leslea Newman, so it is a nice collection from many perspectives. Bruce Coville's title story, "Am I Blue?" is zany and fun while also making

some serious statements about gay life while M. E. Kerr's "We Might As Well All Be Strangers" reminds us that "coming-out stories are a continuing process" (26). The collection is a nice addition to the classroom bookshelf and several stories might even be taught as whole-class readings. A more recent collection, *The Full Spectrum: A New Generation of Writing about Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Other Identities* is also good for the classroom library. These stories were written by today's youth and reflect the experiences of GLBTQ young people in a new light.

High on my list of recommendations is David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy*, another sweet story of teenage romance. The teenagers, however, just happen to be gay. Levithan's book is set in a perfect world where gay love is well accepted, where no one is bothered by the cheerleader/football player cross-dresser, and the biggest problems are how to get the guy and where to hold prom. Of course, even in this perfect world, gay teenagers still struggle with issues like parental acceptance and heartache. Levithan's book is also free of explicit scenes or language, and it is a light-hearted story of young love. Levithan chooses to explore the issues of gay love by painting a picture of what the world could be, giving teens a vision of homosexual love as part of normal routine.

My list of lesbian adolescent stories grows longer every year, since there are so many quality books now with a variety of perspectives, but twenty-five years after its publication, *Annie on My Mind* still remains one of the sweetest lesbian love stories ever written. Nancy Garden's book continues to be challenged and has already seen its days in court, but the book contains no problems with language or explicit scenes. The story follows two young girls who find love but struggle with the fears and many questions of their

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sexuality. Her more recent novel, *Good Moon Rising*, is also a sweet love story plagued by schoolmate harassment. Isabel Miller's *Patience and Sarah*, written in 1969, a lesbian love story set in nineteenth century New England, reveals the historical perspective of homosexual love and "passing."

In recent years, Julie Anne Peters has written several books with strong adolescent lesbian characters, including *Keeping You a Secret* and *Far from Xanadu*, but *Luna* is unique in its story of a teen struggling with transsexual desires. Peters tackles this complicated story with

respect and grace, giving *Luna* the intricacies of a well-rounded individual searching for identity. *Finding H. F.* by Julia Watts and *Orphea Proud* by Sharon Dennis Wyeth are also wonderful books. The Watts story details the journey of a young girl searching for her own identity and the mother who abandoned her and is a wonderful road trip novel about the true nature of families. While *H. F.* is certain of her feelings for another girl, she is heartbroken with the rejection and denial she must face. Wyeth's portrayal of *Orphea*, a young African American lesbian, who is not only rejected by her own family, but also tortured by the death of her lover, is a heart-wrenching depiction of a character who must find the strength to accept her own "self" even when members of her family do not. Lauren Myracle, Sarah Ryan, Tea Benduhn, Jacqueline Woodson, Marilyn Reynolds, and Bonnie Shimko all have recent books with strong lesbian characters. I have included many more recommended books in my reference list below.

I suppose there are many reasons why educators censor books—explicit language, gratuitous sex, scenes of witchcraft, violence, or drugs—but these books do not have any of those issues. The most explicit sex scenes are in Lauren Myracle's book, and

they are part of a heterosexual relationship. These books, like many young adult novels, are well-written portrayals of struggling teens facing issues of love, family, and identity. These teens just happen to be gay. Our questioning young adults need these characters in their lives. Our heterosexual young adults need them too. If the purpose of literature is to share a common existence and provide a broader world view, then these books will help us perform that act, but these books might also help a struggling young person find a sense of self. These books may even save a life.

We face censorship issues every day in America, perhaps in the classroom more than anywhere else. New stories of homosexual penguins, *And Tango Makes Three*, and old stories of Jewish merchants, *The Merchant of Venice*, have all been banned. Classic authors such as Steinbeck and Twain make the list along with modern authors like Toni Morrison and Robert Cormier. Even Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, a book about the evils of banning books, has been banned. In David Levithan's perfect *Boy Meets Boy* world, teachers would be allowed the respect and intellectual freedom to choose the literature they know to be just and true. But in this world the struggle to teach quality texts in America's classrooms must continue. The battle for student rights and profound literature must go on. That much is certain. What remains uncertain is who will have the courage to join the battle.

*After twenty years of teaching high school English in Louisiana public schools, Ruth Caillouet is now the English Education program coordinator at Southeastern Louisiana University. Her passions include adolescent literature, the novels of Toni Morrison, literature of diversity, and women warriors in popular culture.*

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## Gallo Grants

The Gallo Grants were established in 2003 by former ALAN Award and Hipple Award recipient Don Gallo to encourage educators in their early years of teaching to attend the ALAN Workshop for the first time. The grants provide funding—up to \$500 each—for two classroom teachers in middle school or high school each year to attend the ALAN Workshop. (The amount of a grant may be less than \$500 if the applicant lives within commuting distance of the convention location where airfare and housing would not be necessary.)

The Workshop is held at the annual convention of the National Council of Teachers of English on the Monday and Tuesday prior to Thanksgiving Day. Applicants must be teaching full-time; must have been classroom teachers for less than five years prior to the year in which they are applying; and must not have attended an ALAN Workshop previously. Membership in ALAN is not required for consideration, though applicants are expected to become ALAN members if they receive this grant.

Each applicant must fill out the grant application form and submit an essay of no more than 750 words explaining their interest in Young Adult Literature, what they hope to gain by attending this year's ALAN Workshop, and how they hope to use the experience in their classrooms in the future. A letter of support must also come from the applicant's school system. The deadline for submission is September 1. Applicants will be judged on their ability to articulate their understanding of the value of Young Adult Literature as well as their explanation of how they intend to use YA books and the information they gather at the Workshop in their own classrooms.

For further information about this grant, contact ALAN Executive Secretary Gary Salvner at [gsalvner@ysu.edu](mailto:gsalvner@ysu.edu) or 330-941-3414. Information about the ALAN Workshop may be obtained from the ALAN Website—[www.alan-ya.org](http://www.alan-ya.org). Information about the NCTE Convention may be obtained on the NCTE Website—[www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org)—or by writing to NCTE Headquarters at 1111 West Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801.

## The Tiny Key:

Unlocking the Father/Child Relationship in Young Adult Fiction

**M**y young adult novel *The Lucky Place* (Front Street Press) was inspired by a childhood memory about a white horse. Freshly remarried, my mom would see this white horse in the field near our home and lick her thumb and stamp it on her palm for luck. Being little, I was sure this would work, and that our new family would stay charmed forever. But like Cassie in *The Lucky Place*, early childhood belief soon met reality.

My new father died and our family crumbled.

I started a diary the year he died, and I found it years later when I was cleaning out for a move. It's a little book, firm as a miniature suitcase, with gilt edged pages and a blue vinyl cover, a strap that hooks into a gold clasp so you can lock the diary with a tiny key. Only the key is missing and the clasp is fused shut. "One Year Diary," it says on the cover. I wrote in it for six months.

I call it the blue diary.

I open the blue diary at its back. The strap, sewn flimsily, breaks away in my hands and the diary falls open to the last entry, August 19<sup>th</sup>, where I stapled a small square of newsprint. My stepfather's obituary.

What strikes me now is that the first diary I ever kept was written around the love and loss of the man I considered my father, as if the young writer in me already knew

this theme would later inform my work. And so it has. *The Lucky Place* is built around a family with an absent father. But this story is a new direction for me in another way: exploring this theme in fiction for young people and—gift or accident—finding the blue diary provided an uncanny metaphor for this shift.

Suddenly, my perspective as a writer has changed. Instead of the adult entering the diary from its broken back, I'm the girl holding that tiny key. I fit the key into its lock; give it a wiggly turn, and open up to the father/child relationship from a young reader's point of view. What's in my line of sight?

Not only the absent father, but the abandoned child.

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**And what makes people human is the way they connect to others, whether it's through love, hatred or even indifference. There aren't many successful novels with only a single character carrying on for hundreds of pages.**

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Joan Aiken tells us in *The Way to Write for Children* that "the world is *not* a simple place," not even for children. "Far from it," she adds. "The world is an infinitely rich, strange, confusing, wonderful, cruel, mysterious, beautiful, inexplicable riddle" (16). Serious novels for young readers help introduce and solve these riddles for children, maybe for the first time in their lives.

And, just as in adult fiction, human relationships—especially those with family—are one of our biggest riddles. We might talk about plot, characterization, dialogue and voice, but *how* and *why* a character relates a certain

way to others, how she acts and is acted upon, is the lifeblood of story. Think about it. Long after we've forgotten the ins and outs of Huck and Jim going down river, we remember rascally Huck and noble Jim because we remember who they were as people. And what makes people human is the way they connect to others, whether it's through love, hatred or even indifference. There aren't many successful novels with only a single character carrying on for hundreds of pages.

Characters elicit our empathy through their relationships with those they love or long to love because we too need to understand and be understood by our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, lovers and friends. And when we can't untangle the skein in real life, we search for solace in story.

The absent father/abandoned child is one aspect of these tangled relationships of ours, and helping young readers discover and follow this thread in a novel can lead them deeper into story. My own search took me not only into contemporary novels, but back into the abandoned child in history. It turns out that many a literary child hero began as an abandoned child—abandoned by a physically or emotionally absent father.

First, there was the orphan story. Literary history is rife with orphan stories that have captured young reader's hearts, and these stories have paved the way for what in today's literature is known as "psychic, emotional or spiritual orphans"—children whose parents have in one way or another ignored or been unable to meet their emotional needs. A novel about a child who's been emotionally or physically abandoned by his father taps into this long, rich history.

In her book *Orphans: Real and Imaginary*, author Eileen Simpson speaks eloquently to the notion of today's psychic, emotional and spiritual orphans. Simpson herself experienced true orphanhood growing up and notes that orphans share common traits with today's children from dysfunctional or one-parent homes. Vast numbers of children have been adversely affected by "divorce, the remarriage of one or both parents, or the unsuitability of either for the role," says Simpson (221). And many of these children are so emotionally neglected that the loss of the family "shield" has given rise to the concept of growing up "feeling like an orphan." Exactly what being orphaned feels like is inherent in Simpson's own childhood saga.

When Simpson was fifty, her husband's death threw her into a black grief. Depressed and full of separation anxiety, she realized that losing her husband had brought her early childhood losses reeling back. Simpson's mother died before Simpson turned one and her father when she was seven. Simpson adored her father. Prior to his death, he boarded Simpson and her sister Marie in what she thought was a convent school (only years later did she learn this was an orphanage), where he visited them on vacations. The young Simpson was thrilled by his infrequent appearances, and torn by his goodbyes. Already emotionally abandoned by her father, his death sealed Simpson into true orphanhood. As she writes:

To be what Mother Superior had called 'a poor little orphan' meant not to have a father to take one home from the Convent at Christmastime. Later it had meant to have fantasies that he was alive. Later still, when I accepted that he was not, it meant to look for substitutes for him. After Marie married, it meant to stand shakily on my own and to crave sisterly closeness with friends. Always it meant to be excessively affected by separations from those I loved. (9)

Never really having a chance to grieve for her missing parents in childhood, Simpson wrote her book as a way to catch up emotionally as an adult. Part memoir, part history, part literary journey, *Orphans* moves from Simpson's own experience into a discussion of literary orphans down through the ages. And what makes the book sing is her exploration of how it felt to be orphaned *through her innocence as a child*, the same viewpoint writers of literature for young people must establish. In addition, following the evolution of orphan literature Simpson puts forth reads like a blueprint for the emergence of the child hero himself.

For centuries, writes Simpson, unwanted children have been killed, cast out, farmed out as labor, or sent to almshouses to be raised by the insane. Certainly there was little room for the younger hero's voice in literature during these bleak years, when life expectancy was thirty years, and infanticide was the norm for countless children who lost their parents (136). The early Christian Church first concerned itself with housing these abandoned children in institutions, setting a precedent for orphanages down through the ages, where there was little room for a sense of individuality that would later birth the child hero.

Children “lived in the institution until they were seven or eight,” notes Simpson, “at which time they were either adopted or bound out as apprentices or servants” (138). During these times, “neglect and ill treatment of the young were so commonplace that the child without parents was little worse off than the one with them” (140).

The idea of orphans as a separate class, says Simpson, and the concept of the child as individual, surfaced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By then childhood had, “been carved out as a stage of life between infancy and maturity, and the family unit had been consolidated” (140). Once the notion of “childhood” existed, this notion opened the door to the child as individual, and eventually as the hero of her own tale.

What’s interesting is how the concept of the child as a separate being came to light when literary

sympathy finally cast its eye on the plight of orphans; now it was the neglected orphan who stood in contrast to a child protected by her parents (today’s “emotional and spiritual orphans” stand out in a similar fashion). As Simpson puts it, “not until the bourgeois family reached its sentimental peak and middle-and upper-class children were

cosseted as never before, did the orphan’s lot become sufficiently poignant to make it a subject of novelistic interest [. . .]” (140).

We read many of these novels as children and teens, novels which had orphans as their main characters and (although not always considered novels for young adults) nonetheless signaled the emergence of the child as hero of his tale. Consider Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist*, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Even books such as Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* centered on characters that were, if not full orphans, in some way emotionally abandoned by a parent, and showed neglected children through the child’s eyes.

Why did these nineteenth century authors turn to the neglected and orphaned as their main characters? No doubt it had much to do with the autobiographical link to the childhoods of the writers themselves.

Novels are not necessarily autobiographies in disguise, but as Mario Vargas Llosa writes in his *Letters to a Young Novelist*, “All stories are rooted in the lives of those who write them [. . .]. In every fiction, even the most freely imagined, it is possible to uncover a starting point, a secret node viscerally linked to the experiences of the writer” (16).

Dickens’ father went bankrupt when Charles was twelve, and the family sent their eldest boy to work in a blacking factory. Raised in middle-class comfort, Dickens never forgot his time living as an impoverished orphan, and his child orphans such as David in *David Copperfield*, reflect his history. “The book might have had for subtitle, *Orphans All*,” writes Simpson, “for it contains a veritable anthology of degrees of the parentless state” (185).

Charlotte Brontë was a maternal orphan. By the time she was nine, she’d lost her mother and her mother surrogate, her sister, Maria. No wonder the boarding school she attended became the fictional model for Lowood Institution in *Jane Eyre*, the orphanage where young Jane spends eight years (189). One can easily imagine that, like her character Jane, Charlotte Brontë must have felt like a full orphan when her father sent her away.

“The secret source of humor,” Mark Twain once said, “is not joy, but sorrow.” Born Samuel Clemens, Twain lost his father when he was twelve. Although he’d never gotten along with Tucker Clemens, when his father died, the young Twain was filled with remorse and guilt. And it was during this painful period in his life that he was apprenticed to a printer. He later wrote of this difficult time that while living with the printer he got “more board than clothes, and not much of either,” saying jokingly that dressed in the printer’s oversized clothes he looked like “Huckleberry Finn” (199).

And what of Louisa May Alcott, whose first novel about the March family had no true orphans?

In Clinton Cox’s biography of Twain, *Mark Twain*, he quotes Louisa May Alcott as saying prissily of Twain’s “boy’s books” that “If Mr. Clemens cannot think of something better to tell our pure-minded lads and lassies, he had better stop writing for them”

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**What’s interesting is how the concept of the child as a separate being came to light when literary sympathy finally cast its eye on the plight of orphans . . . .**

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(158). Yet Alcott herself never enjoyed writing about those good little girls in *Little Women* and in fact wrote more torrid stories under another name.

Alcott grew up “afraid and ashamed,” says Mary E. Lyons in her book of women writers’ diaries, *Keeping Secrets*, because of her father, Bronson Alcott. Bronson, a self-proclaimed Transcendentalist, decided when Louisa was young that it was unseemly for him to work for wages. Instead, his family moved often, living on the charity of relatives and on audience donations when Bronson gave his “spiritual” lectures.

Enamored of the idea of self-exploration, Bronson spent his life writing thirty thousand pages of diary and ignoring, according to many accounts, his family’s needs and wants. “Unable to express deep emotion,” says Lyons, “he sometimes substituted them [the diaries] for himself” (15). He insisted his girls each keep a diary, too, and inspected them regularly for “moral growth.” Louisa, who longed to be the “good girl” her father wanted her to be, was instead often disobedient in his eyes. By the time she was fourteen, Bronson was so displeased with Louisa that he mentioned her only once in his diary for the entire year: “I had a Possessed One sitting by my side all winter,” he wrote of Louisa, adding that her “will was bound in chains by the devil” (20).

Not until Louisa wrote her sweet “girl story” *Little Women*, which became an instant success and supported her family, did she finally find a way to be the obedient daughter. “Superior gifts as a writer,” Bronson now wrote in his diary of Louisa. “I am introduced as the father of *Little Women*” (30) he preens. No wonder he was so pleased, since it was Bronson, himself a frustrated writer, who’d urged Louisa to write *Little Women*. Yet, as Louisa confided in her now private diary, “[I] never liked girls, or knew many, except my sisters.” And she complained that writing the four-hundred-page manuscript was a chore she found “dull” (29): a complaint she never stopped making throughout her series about the March family. Still, she managed to add a subtext to *Little Women* that reached into the hearts of readers for over a century—how the four girls survive Papa March as the absent father. In *Little Women* and its sequels, Papa is either away at war, or shut up among his books, and is hardly seen at all. It’s Jo March and her sisters who find a way to keep the household together.

“Although Bronson was physically present when she was growing up,” Lyons says of the parallels between Bronson and Papa March, “Louisa could not depend on him. She loved the ‘dear man,’ but he let her down, year after year. Since she never criticized him aloud, the fictional father’s absence disclosed the real father’s distance from his family’s distress” (30).

Louisa May Alcott was searching for the truth in her writing, whether or not she was able to admit it to herself, and her story leaves clues for readers today. If a writer is authentic, she doesn’t so much choose the relationships her characters will have, and who they will have them with, as they choose her. You could even say these relationships have already been chosen by the questions about life that pursue a writer, the stories that began looking for her when she was a child. For many writers that often leads back to the father/child relationship. And allowing for this remembered experience puts the tiny key back in a writer’s hands, and turns the diary lock.

According to author Wallace Stegner, self-examination is essential for writers. “What we write and what we read,” says Stegner in *On Teaching and Writing Fiction*, “is likely to be as frivolous or as serious as our lives are. If we never examine our lives, we are not likely to get much out of fiction that makes such examination its function” (97). Stegner himself was a product of a difficult father/child relationship, and his youth was spent “resenting [his] father’s impatience and violence” (114)—a resentment that did not fade even when he was a grown man and his father long dead. Stegner’s odyssey to heal old wounds was launched with “Goin’ to Town,” a short story he wrote in 1940.

“Goin’ to Town” begins with a boy’s excitement

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**By the time she was fourteen, Bronson was so displeased with Louisa that he mentioned her only once in his diary for the entire year: “I had a Possessed One sitting by my side all winter,” he wrote of Louisa, adding that her “will was bound in chains by the devil” (20). [May Alcott]**

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over the prospect of leaving his family's isolated homestead for a day in town. But the boy's happiness dwindles to despair when the car won't start, and each attempt his father makes to fix it fails. In the end, the boy's keen disappointment is matched by his father's anger, and instead of gaining his father's sympathy, the boy feels his sudden blows.

“[. . .] One of the reasons people write fiction is to heal themselves by making an improved model of some aspect of their lives” notes Stegner about this highly autobiographical tale, but “as it turned out, this story didn't do the job.” He had to write similar situations into his novels *Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Recapitulation* “before the past seemed to me healed” (115).

Stories such as Stegner's “Goin' to Town” (and novels like J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, which featured the angst-ridden adolescent Holden Caulfield), bring us to today's child and give us a look at the new orphan story, centered on the “psychic, emotional or spiritually” abandoned young. Who are these modern children who “feel like orphans” in Simpson's words and now haunt our fiction for young readers?

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**In these later instances, even though the father is present, he's *too* present. He demands his child be of his own making, rather than an independent human being.**

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In their book *The Father-Daughter Dance*, Barbara Goulter and Joan Minninger speak to the modern era of family crisis and abandonment that now shows up so frequently in both adult and children's literature, noting that often times these children are fatherless. In the sixties, the authors say, with the break-up of families came soaring divorce rates and “births to

unmarried mothers, and great numbers of children growing up fatherless.” By the nineties, our literature had begun to reflect this fatherless state as never before (18). “One after another, important women authors like Germaine Greer, Kate Millet, and Gloria Steinem published books which revealed their childhood abandonment by their fathers,” Goulter and Minninger write (19).

In addition, male writers such as Robert Bly, Sam

Keen and Tucker Bradshaw “popularized the concept of ‘father hunger,’ arguing that boys who grow up without fathers never get over the loss” (19).

But there are more ways than one to be abandoned. *Father-Daughter Dance* cites six recurring patterns that range from physical abuse, abandonment through death, desertion or emotional detachment, to fathers who over-spoil their daughters or raise them to be their companion or caretaker. In these later instances, even though the father is present, he's *too* present. He demands his child be of his own making, rather than an independent human being. (Consider Anna Freud, who even though brilliant in her own right, spent much of her adult life caring for her mentor/father during his protracted illness. Anna Freud canceled important lectures and stayed at Freud's side performing duties any hired nurse could easily do, because her father insisted she alone should take care of him.)

While *Father-Daughter Dance* notes that these patterns are prevalent in father and daughter relationships, variations on the theme are recognizable in father and son relationships as well. In the collection *Fathers and Children in Literature and Art*, editor Charles Sullivan has put together poems, essays and artwork centered on fathers and children through the ages. Here modern essays such as Carl Jung's “The Significance of the Father in the Destiny of the Individual” and Pablo Neruda's poem “Father” speak to the plight of neglected boys.

Jung notes that fathers are passing a curse on to their children when they “criticize every sign of emotional independence,” including those who “keep their sons on a leash or force them into a profession” (62). And in Neruda's poem a railroad man and “brusque” father returns to his family like a gusty wind so that the “The house/staggered, /a panic of doorways/exploded with a dry/sound of pistols” (73).

In a reflective tone, Neruda calls the man in his poem “Poor, durable father, /there on the axle of life” (74), and we feel the narrator looking back with some perspective on a man who ruled his life. But what of our protagonists in novels for young adult readers who don't have the luxury of hindsight?

One of the great charms of YA literature is seeing life through young eyes, holding that tiny key as it were, with a sense of *immediacy*. Young heroes are not reflecting on their lives as adults, but discovering the

world, as Joan Aiken puts it, for the first time. “[. . .] The child reads quite *uncritically*,” says Aiken, “he has never encountered anything of this kind before; or, we cannot assume that he has” (9). And while Aiken’s statement might seem to apply only to very young readers, it can also apply to young adult readers discovering for the first time, novels with sophisticated subjects such as the father/child relationship.

This is an exciting moment, when readers experience the personal, human connection to themselves in a novel. And we can help deepen their insight in the classroom when we help them uncover the relationships that both create—and drive—plot.

Look at a contemporary novel such as *Many Stones* by Carolyn Coman. In *Many Stones* the main character, Berry, is both physically and emotionally abandoned by her father. Her anger and loss, and ultimately her need to reconnect with him, actively drive the plot from denial to a decision that reveals character growth until Berry has come of age.

We so often hear the term coming of age, we can forget the emotional impact behind it. But coming of age is a painful journey that connects our fictional characters to universal truths we all experience. As the authors of *The Father-Daughter Dance* put it: “As children, we lived in worlds of fantasy. The people close to us loomed enormous and seemed to have wondrous powers. Our mothers were queens and fairy godmothers when they satisfied our wishes, wicked witches when they didn’t. Our fathers were kings or giants” (169).

Thus, when a very young child is abandoned or betrayed by her father, she’s in effect being betrayed by life itself. “Her father can’t be ‘just a man,’” say Goulter and Minninger, because “she has no idea of what ‘just a man’ is. Instead, he’s a god, a king, a giant [. . .]. If she can’t trust him, how can she trust God or life or any man?” (169).

In this magical world, a father makes a child feel safe, but if that safety is threatened, the child believes she can influence and change events, setting them right again. “We thought we could make things happen by wishing,” say Goulter and Minninger about childhood (169). (Recall how

Simpson fantasized, after her father’s death, that he was still alive). And although this magical world is soon enough dashed by reality when we’ve been disappointed in childhood, we cling unconsciously to that old magical thinking as we grow.

We want to change it back; we want our fathers to be gods and giants so we can be safe once more. But our fathers are often much too human. In fiction, our child characters too, are learning this painful lesson (or not). They’re embroiled in a conflict with their fathers and their humanness. They’re learning the gods in their lives are mere mortals, and not magic at all. Or they hold on to the magic, and sacrifice their own character growth.

Watching a child character respond to such dilemmas touches on the experience of us all. Sometimes, say the authors of *Father-Daughter Dance*, the child finds her father, only to be rejected again; sometimes she tries to compensate for his loss with substitutes; and sometimes she discovers him just when he needs her, to their mutual delight. Berry in *Many Stones*, is about to “discover” her father.

As the novel opens, Berry is literally buried in grief. It’s been a year since her sister Laura was murdered in South Africa, and Berry’s guilt and sorrow keep her as mute as the stones she piles on her chest at night to weight her down. “So I know there’s something there to be weighted [. . .]” she says. “I’m like the stones: dumb. As in, can’t speak” (9). Immediately, we’re in Berry’s story, feeling her loss, and the stones are a metaphor for her denial. Cut off emotionally, she covers her heart and creates an image of burial that haunts the novel, just as her unresolved feelings haunt her life. From these opening scenes, we understand that Berry is repressing her grief, and that it can literally “kill” her.

But Berry’s repression goes beyond her sister’s death. Like Simpson, whose husband’s death brought back her buried childhood grief, Laura’s death has caused Berry’s other loss to surface: the emotional abandonment by her distant father, Myles. Long since divorced from Berry’s mother and never very attentive, Myles seems bent on reentering Berry’s life, but only as a way to refashion Berry as

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**We want to change it back; we want our fathers to be gods and giants so we can be safe once more. But our fathers are often much too human.**

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Laura, the daughter he preferred.

We know Berry has grown up feeling Laura was the daughter who could talk to Myles, the one he felt followed in his footsteps, because Berry herself feels Myles is disappointed and ashamed of her. As she puts it, “The sliding. That. My grades, my attitude, my appearance. Dad hates what is left of my hair” (25). Yet ironically, when Myles talks Berry into a trip to Africa (to attend a memorial service for Laura), he becomes the catalyst for Berry’s emotional journey back to a place where she can cast the stones from her heart for good.

As *Many Stones* unfolds, we come to see that as much as anything it is the distant, self-centered Myles who has been standing in the way of Berry’s healing, and the physical journey father and daughter take parallels the emotional one: Myles and Berry traverse the politically sensitive areas of South Africa at the same time that they travel the inner minefield of their relationship. And what Berry discovers (and accepts) about her father has a direct impact on her growth as a character.

In the beginning, Berry sees her father as a big man. He works as a lobbyist and is used to, both literally and figuratively, “getting people to see things his way” (24). Berry is sickened that her father thinks Laura was so much like him. She doesn’t want to go with Myles to Africa, and yet, when he asks her, she suddenly, surprisingly agrees to the trip. Why? Because Berry feels like an abandoned child. And, in *Many Stones*, Myles has the potential to finally become the father Berry needs, and the reader’s hope for a good outcome creates the emotional tension in the book. Despite the fact that throughout her childhood Berry remembers her father choosing to be with Laura, we do get glimpses of a possible reconciliation when she fondly remembers Myles once buying her the bike of her dreams.

This hope for reconciliation is rekindled when Myles invites Berry on the South African trip, and we root for father and daughter. Yet when Myles tells Berry he knows this year has been hard on her, without Laura, it sounds like a platitude to the grieving Berry. Through Berry’s memories, we’ve already seen that her feelings for Laura run much deeper than her father’s shallow words can reach.

Laura taught Berry to swim at age five, and in her gentle approach gave Berry a lifelong love of water.

“I’ve got you,” Berry remembers Laura saying as Berry floated on her back. “And I knew she did. I could feel her fingertips under my back, guiding me through the water, and every once in a while I’d open my eyes and look at her in her orange two-piece with her beautiful perfect teeth [. . .]” (13).

Thus Berry’s sensitive, inner world contrasts with her outward, hostile actions toward her father and shows us her struggle to mature. Consider her inner reflection after she has lashed out at her father during a tour of a squatter village in Soweto: “He probably thinks I want to be like this—how I’m acting,” she thinks, “the words that come slicing out of my mouth, the sound of my voice. Can he really not know that I hate it, too? That I hate everything? *No* one wants to be like this [. . .]” (57).

What young adult hasn’t felt this way? As Berry struggles, she begins to see (and the reader along with her) the human side of her father, and a confirmation of his faults. Myles barrels through his agenda in South Africa, asking all the right questions about poverty, apartheid and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings—public hearings in which human rights abusers admit their crimes as a way to “reconcile” with their victims—but when Myles merely mouths his answers, not actually *feeling* them, Berry is determined to find answers of her own.

During a discussion with her father, Berry turns the conversation from the unfairness of political amnesty for those who tortured their victims, to the unfairness of her sister’s murder, and she tries desperately to get her father to talk honestly about his daughter’s death. For a moment, it seems she might succeed, but Myles is soon reaching for his platitudes again, effectively becoming the distant father once more (68). Even so, Berry can’t let go. “Would you say what *you* did—” she presses her father about crimes and forgiveness, “was the worst and cruelest thing? And then ask to go free?” (71).

Myles acts confused by Berry’s onslaught, but Coman has put us smack in Berry’s shoes and we know she needs her anger and grief addressed when she cries: “People *have* to be sorry for hurting other people! They have to be!” her demands going deeper than Myles can know. She silently pleads, “*Be sorry* [. . .]. *You* be sorry, Dad” (73).

Is Myles sorry? Father and daughter have reached the heart of their emotional dilemma in *Many Stones*,

<p><b><i>Absolute Brightness</i></b> by James Lecesne Harper Teen, imprint of HarperCollins, 2008, 472 pp., \$21.89</p> <p>Nothing is what it seems, learns 15-year-old Phoebe the year her almost-14-year-old cousin Leonard Pelkey comes to live with her family. Arriving in pink and green capri pants and homemade platform shoes, Leonard rates “instant reject” status in Phoebe’s book. After he disappears, though, Phoebe begins to see him, her family, her best friend, her community, and human nature in a different light.</p> <p><i>Absolute Brightness</i> is Phoebe’s first-person investigation of Leonard’s disappearance. Even as Phoebe looks beneath appearances into the dark heart of evil, that voice remains authentically adolescent.</p> <p>A light-hearted study of serious issues, <i>Absolute Brightness</i> will have readers of many ages and interests turning pages, chuckling, wondering, thinking.</p> <p>Judy Beemer Milford, KS</p>	<p><b><i>The Adoration of Jenna Fox</i></b> by Mary E. Pearson Henry Holt, 2008, 272 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Jenna Fox, conceived through invitro-fertilization, is the only child of a bioengineer and his house-restorer wife. Having been in a permanent coma for a year after a horrendous auto accident, Jenna at 17 finds herself living in California with limited memory of what happened. Her parents keep her hidden and refuse to answer questions about her past in Boston. Her grandmother Lily seems to resent her, while Jenna begins to search for herself only to discover a scenario that is surreal and frightening.</p> <p>Although the novel is set in the future, the mystery’s explanation seems wildly plausible. Jenna’s father has bypassed federal permission to create his daughter as she once was, physically and mentally, using a substance he created called Bio Gel and other aspects of bioengineering. Retaining only 10 percent of her original brain’s memory, Jenna struggles to discover who she really is as she gradually weans herself from her overprotective parents to live as human an existence as she can.</p> <p>Judith A. Hayn Little Rock, AR</p>
<p><b><i>A Beginning, a Muddle, and an End: The Right Way to Write Writing</i></b> by Avi Harcourt, 2008, 164 pp., \$14.95</p> <p>Avi continues the adventures of Avon the snail and Edward the ant in order to explore the process of writing and becoming a writer. Part fable, part <i>Alice in Wonderland</i>, a <i>Beginning, a Muddle, and an End</i> attempts to express wisdom about writing through the confusion that results from the characters’ misunderstandings of concepts of writing. For example, when Avon declares, “I’ve always thought that it would be best to keep my writing on the light side,” Edward replies, “Writing in the dark is harder.”</p> <p>The entire book is a series (a muddle, perhaps) of similar explorations and insights, covering spelling, punctuation, and so on. And while the book exploits the genre conventions of children’s literature, writers of all ages will appreciate the understanding Avon and Edward uncover through their discussions. In fact, the individual chapters could serve as springboards to serious discussions of the writing process by adolescent and adult writing classes and writing groups.</p> <p>F. Todd Goodson Manhattan, KS</p>	<p><b><i>Bird Lake Moon</i></b> by Kevin Henkes Greenwillow/HarperCollins, 2008, 192 pp., \$15.99</p> <p>Mitch Sinclair’s world is falling apart: his parents are selling their home and divorcing. While arrangements are being made, Mitch and his mother move to Bird Lake to live with his grandparents. His grandparents welcome them with open arms, but as time passes, tension develops between his grandparents and his mother. Mitch discovers a neighboring house, vacant, near the lake. He escapes the stress by cleaning up around the house and fantasizing that he and his mother live there.</p> <p>When Spencer, his younger sister and parents show up at the house, Mitch sets out to scare them away with pranks. His plan goes awry, however, once he and Spencer meet—they become close. Mitch reveals his pain about his family breaking apart, and Spencer shares his family’s deepest pain: the death of a child years ago at Bird Lake.</p> <p>This is a quiet story about loss and the healing power of friendship. Rich characterizations and sparse language compel the story forward. The ending hints to a possible sequel.</p> <p>Pam B. Cole Kennesaw, GA</p>

<p><b><i>Blood Roses</i></b> by Francesca Lia Block HarperCollins, 2008, 144 pp., \$15.99</p> <p>Magical Realism/Transformation ISBN: 978-0-06-076384-8</p> <p>Francesca Lia Block, winner of the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime contributions to young adult literature, serves up yet another collection of thought-provoking magical realism stories. A genre-defying writer, Block delivers nine stories told from the female perspective; some are connected, and most include or describe a transformation: a girl becomes a giant (giantess); a boy, a centaur, and a mother, a vampire. Themes include dangerous first encounters, first kisses, teen sex, sexual abuse, friendship, death, identity and maturation.</p> <p>As thought-provoking as her earlier works, this collection is characterized by Block's signature style: her sentence structure is sparse; yet her writing is poetic and metaphorical. Literary motifs abound: blood roses, dollhouses, and tattoos speak to pain, fear, and loss. The brief vignettes are excellent models for creative writing. The stories are short, but complex. For mature readers, grades 10 and up.</p> <p>Pam B. Cole Kennesaw, GA</p>	<p><b><i>Book of a Thousand Days</i></b> by Shannon Hale Bloomsbury, 2007, 306 pp., \$17.95</p> <p>Female Friendship/Healing ISBN: 978-1-59990-051-3</p> <p>Princess Saren is in love with Khan Tegus but betrothed to the dark Lord Khasar. Saren fears him, for good reason, and rejects the match. As punishment for her rebelliousness, her father locks her in a windowless tower for seven years. As the novel opens, Princess Saren is alone, except for the companionship of her mucker maid, Dashit.</p> <p>In this recasting of Grimm's classic fairy tale, Newbery Award winning author Shannon Hale once again delights modern audiences with a feisty, female protagonist, who not only must come into her own but also protect the fearful, insecure Princess from herself as well as from others who would do her harm.</p> <p>Young adult girls, who are also on their own journeys of self-discovery, will be enchanted by this tale about female friendships, healing, and coming of age amidst the real-world tensions of betrayal, abandonment, deception, and loss. Discussion of literary elements, such as the narrative structure of fairy tales or the traditional use of character types, will make this book a productive companion to a study of classic tales in the ELA classroom.</p> <p>Phyllis Thompson Johnson City, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Cherry Heaven</i></b> by L. J. Adlington Greenwillow Books, 2008, 458 pp., \$17.89</p> <p>Science Fiction ISBN: 978-0-06-143181-4</p> <p><i>Cherry Heaven</i> by L.J. Adlington takes the reader to another world where one's life has been determined by the color of the individual's hand stamp. Tanika and Kat, sisters from war-torn City Five, travel in the highest luxury available as they arrive to the New Frontier with high expectations: some are met and some are not.</p> <p>As Tanika and Kat learn to live in the New Frontier, another girl, Bottle Seal 55, is also on a journey, a journey in search of revenge and truth. When the girls' paths cross, decisions will have to be made. Do the sisters have enough strength and courage to stand up for what is right? Is there really a ghost out in the orchard? Are people still considered people even if some in society consider them scum?</p> <p>Adlington delivers the readers a variety of moral themes that must be considered as the multi-layered plot unfolds. Although <i>Cherry Heaven</i> appears daunting at nearly 500 pages, readers of all levels who enjoy science fiction and fantasy will enjoy this novel as well.</p> <p>Rebekah Skillen Manhattan, KS</p>	<p><b><i>The Dragonfly Keeper</i></b> by Tanya Plumel Fava Press, 2008, 254 pp., \$12.95</p> <p>Fantasy ISBN: 0-9801396-0-0</p> <p>After Fritz their dog gets out of the house and runs away from them, Manuela and Silvia begin their adventure. Their neighbor, Miss Sasha, an odd, weathered woman, offers the girls cider and suggests they "help save the magic in this sad world." The girls agree, and after Miss Sasha dresses them in costumes, she hands them a smooth shaanti, or place stone. Miss Sasha explains there are three rules for using the stone, and the girls go in search of "the Weaver."</p> <p>Their quest to protect the Dragonflies is riddled with missed steps and separations. The girls and Fritz do their best to save the Dragonflies from the "Rogs."</p> <p>Plumel uses imagination and her main characters to weave a story where working together and trusting magic and others brings the girls home safely. An appendix of language translations helps the reader understand unfamiliar words.</p> <p>Deborah Barnes Junction City, KS</p>

## Clip & File YA Book Reviews

<p><b><i>Dragon's Keep</i></b> by Janet Lee Carey          Magic Carpet Books, 2008, 320 pp., \$7.95</p> <p>Rosalind is a beautiful princess with a bright destiny. It has been prophesied that she would bring peace and restore the honor of her people. But Rosalind also bears a curse, a dragon's claw.</p> <p>Rosalind's mother forces her daughter to wear gloves to cover her devil's mark, even killing to hide Rosalind's curse. But fate overtakes the young princess when she is kidnapped by Lord Faul. Rosalind learns the truth behind her curse and struggles to learn who she truly is.</p> <p>Carey spins a story of magic, destiny, treachery and love that is exciting and emotional. Readers will identify with Rosalind's attempt to discover who she is and where she belongs. The book is appropriate for middle and high schoolers.</p> <p>Karolinde Young          Manhattan, KS</p>	<p><b><i>The Entertainer and the Dybbuk</i></b> by Sid Fleischman          Greenwillow Books, 2008, 180 pp. \$17.89</p> <p>Touring post World War II Europe by train, <i>The Great Freddie</i> encounters a mysterious traveling companion. Together, the two of them regale audiences with tales of humor and atrocity. Freddie becomes bound to the spirit of this young Jewish boy, Avrom Amos. The only way the <i>entertainer</i> can return to his own "normal" life is to accompany this <i>dybbuk</i> on a cross-continental journey of revenge.</p> <p>Newberry Medalist Sid Fleischman captivates young readers from the first moment Freddie steps off the vaudevillian stage. Colorful characters and humorous on-stage dialogue juxtapose the serious business being conducted behind the scenes. So engaging is the tale of Freddie and Avrom's journey of revenge that readers may be unaware of how subtly they have been drawn onto a larger stage, one that portrays the atrocities to which Jewish children fell victim during the Holocaust.</p> <p>Patricia Ackerman          Abilene, KS</p>
<p><b><i>Facts of Live</i></b> by Gary Soto          Harcourt, 2008, 176 pp., \$16.00</p> <p>Gary Soto's collection of short fiction offers a variety of adolescent characters lives at the intersection of Spanish and English languages and Mexican and American cultures. The portraits of the lives of these young people are gentle explorations of the profound implications of their ordinary lives. We see a talented young artist, for example, and through her eyes we discover the contrast between the natural beauty surrounding her life and the relative poverty of her family's small trailer on a <i>ranchito</i>. We follow the adventures of a young man who, frustrated after striking out to end a softball game, unwittingly assists a suspicious character (likely a burglar). Through his adventures we see the richness of his life, family, and community.</p> <p><i>Facts of Life</i> is a nice collection of stories that should help adolescent readers appreciate and respect how we are all citizens of the world.</p> <p>F. Todd Goodson          Manhattan, KS</p>	<p><b><i>Genius Squad</i></b> by Catherine Jinks          Harcourt, 2008, 436 pp., \$17.00</p> <p>Much of the fun in reading <i>Evil Genius</i>, the first book of this series by Catherine Jinks, was the twist of following Cadel Piggott through the Axis Institute for World Domination. It was a fresh perspective on evil characters. Her sequel, <i>Genius Squad</i>, loses the tongue-in-cheek style but carves out its own exciting story as Cadel continues his quests to discover the identity of his father, to consider whether he's actually all that evil, and to find a place where he can finally have 24/7 access to the Internet.</p> <p><i>Genius Squad</i> picks up shortly after the events in <i>Evil Genius</i>, with Cadel living in a foster home under constant police protection. Cadel is approached by the Genius Squad, a group formed to investigate GenoME, one of the late Dr. Darkkon's projects.</p> <p>The series continues to be a great read for sharp-minded students interested in computers and hacking, along with a bit of James Bond-style action and plots for world domination thrown into the mix. Readers who rarely see their interests portrayed in YA literature will finally find them here.</p> <p>John Ritchie          Manhattan, KS</p>

<p><b><i>Come</i></b> by Michael Grant Harper Teen, 2008, 576 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Apocalyptic/Science Fiction ISBN: 978-0-06-144876-8</p> <p>When everyone over the age of fourteen suddenly vanishes, San Perdido Beach, California is never the same. Not only are all of the adults gone, but there are no working telephones, no Internet access, no cable, and only children left behind to deal with the aftermath. Fires begin from appliances left on when the adults vanished. There are no firemen to put out the fires. Cars smash into buildings and each other, after being relieved of their drivers, but there are no emergency workers or doctors to help care for the children who are injured. What caused this all to happen?</p> <p>Kids must care for younger children as well as themselves. And those kids all look to Sam Temple, nicknamed "School Bus Sam" for his heroics in saving the kids in a near-disaster on a school bus a couple of years before. Will Sam be able to bring order where there is chaos and confusion? Will the adults return? And what is the FAYZ? A definite page-turner that will keep readers hooked from the very first paragraph on.</p> <p>Jennifer Lee Louisville, KY</p>	<p><b><i>The Great Race: The Amazing Round-the-World Auto Race of 1908</i></b> by Gary Blackwood Abram Books for Young Readers, 2008, 142 pp., \$19.95 ISBN: 978-0-8109-9489-8</p> <p>Automobile History/Racing</p> <p>The year is 1908, and three companies from three different countries have assembled teams to compete in a round-the-world race. The gimmick? The racers will be driving the new-fangled horseless carriage.</p> <p>Blackwood details the adventures and misadventures of the German, Italian, and American teams as they race from New York to Paris. The racers cross some of the most hostile and unforgiving climates in the world, including Siberia, in an attempt to prove the greatness of their new machines and bolster the burgeoning nationalism that is spreading across the globe.</p> <p>Blackwood does an excellent job of detailing the many difficulties faced by the men running the race. Perhaps the greatest strength of the book, beyond the exciting pictures, is the final chapter describing the aftermath of the race. Blackwood connects the race to the rise of the automobile culture as well as the World Wars. This book is appropriate for upper elementary and above.</p> <p>Karolinde Young Manhattan, KS</p>
<p><b><i>The Higher Power of Lucky</i></b> by Susan Patron Atheneum, 2007, 134 pp., \$16.95 ISBN: 978-1-4169-0194-5</p> <p>Abandoned Children/Friendship ISBN: 978-1-4169-0194-5</p> <p>At ten years old, Lucky has hit rock bottom: her biological mother is dead, her father is "absent," and her most loyal companion in the world, HMS Beagle, leaves her in a dust storm in the desert. Lucky's life is spinning out of control.</p> <p>It is not until she heads into the Mojave desert that she charts her own course and gains the perspective to take control of her life. However, holed up in a cave during a dust storm, she finds herself caring for a scared five-year old named Miles, who is also lost and motherless, instead of forging ahead with her own quest for stability and control.</p> <p>Hard Pan (pop. 34) is every town, and Lucky is every kid, whose issue is abandonment, whose life is complicated, and who knows one doesn't have to be an adult to hit rock bottom. <i>The Higher Power of Lucky</i> is a story about vision and about the perseverance it takes to wait for the storm to pass and the dust to settle.</p> <p>Phyllis Thompson Johnson City, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Honeybee</i></b> by Naomi Shihab Nye Greenwillow Books, 2008, 164 pp., \$17.89 ISBN: 978-0-06-085390-7</p> <p>Poetry/Self Discovery ISBN: 978-0-06-085390-7</p> <p>Through her practice of being present in each moment, Shihab Nye embarks on a journey of self discovery. This insightful collection of eighty-two poems and prose paragraphs examines cultural diversity and family dynamics set against the purposeful motion of bees. Dynamic patterns of literary insight illuminate the connectedness of all humanity through the eyes of a constantly moving observer. Lighting briefly at precise moments in time, the author departs with newly found insights and a satiated feeling of personal connectedness.</p> <p>Astute imagery draws the reader into Nye's vision of a "shared world" where humans connect with one another, regardless of apparent differences. She demonstrates that in order to experience this phenomenon, individuals must learn to be present through all of their senses, opening themselves to the wonders of human existence. This work embodies Emerson's own literary advice to "adopt the pace of nature. Her secret is patience."</p> <p>Patricia E. Ackerman Abilene, KS</p>

## Clip & File YA Book Reviews

<p><b><i>The Hunger Games</i></b> by Suzanne Collins Scholastic Press, 2008, 407 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Take the ancient Greek myth of Crete demanding Athens send 14 of its children as sacrificial tributes, substitute the minotaur for gladiator combat pitting the youths against one another, set it in a dystopic future, make it all entertainment for the reality television of a tyrannical government, and then give it characters that add his/her own twist to the story—these are the ingredients for <i>The Hunger Games</i>, the first book in a thrilling new trilogy from Suzanne Collins.</p> <p>Collins doesn't waste a single character in the entire novel. From our narrator-heroine Katniss Everdeen, to her Hunger Games sponsor Haymitch Abernathy, to Hunger Games show host Caesar Flickerman, each character is rich in depth and worthy of his/her own story.</p> <p>Collins also keeps the action moving at a smooth and quick pace. The novel is violent without ever being bloody. Collins avoids easy, Hollywood-style endings and gives us realistic, complex characters. Librarians and teachers will have a hard time keeping this book on their shelves.</p> <p>John Ritchie Wamego, KS</p>	<p><b><i>In Defiance of Hitler: The Secret Mission of Varian Fry</i></b> by Carla Killough McClafferty Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008, 208 pp., \$19.95 ISBN: 978-0-374-38204-9</p> <p><i>In Defiance of Hitler</i> offers an accessible and interesting presentation of the efforts of Varian Fry to help people escape the Holocaust. The narrative begins with Fry's observation of a racist mob in Berlin in July 1935 and continues through his life as a writer following the war.</p> <p>This book is a valuable addition to sources about the Holocaust for young people. The book includes numerous black and white photographs from the period, and the narrative offers an insight to the conditions in occupied France and the methods Fry and his associates used to assist in the escape of Jews and Anti-Nazi French citizens. The text is accessible to adolescents, offering a detailed and accurate representation of historical events in a narrative style replete with compelling details. The book should be included in the libraries of all secondary schools, and the book provides a vivid example of an individual taking great personal risks on behalf of the needs of others.</p> <p>F. Todd Goodson Manhattan, KS</p>
<p><b><i>In the Small</i></b> by Michael Hague Little Brown for Young People, 124 pp., \$19.99</p> <p>The illustrator Michael Hague creates his debut graphic novel based on the Gaia theory that posits that living organisms will adapt the nature of their environment in order to make the environment more suitable for life. A mysterious blue flash hits New York City and reduces the human inhabitants to one-twelfth their size. Mouse Willow foresees the catastrophe and leads city dwellers in a ragtag citizens' army to escape the chaos through the tunnels.</p> <p>Meanwhile, his sister Beatrice at the family home creates her own ecosystem within the walled perimeter. As Mouse approaches, she leaves safety to comb the dangerous streets to seek others caught in the upheaval. Mouse and his survivors find pharmacy and toy store supplies in an abandoned mall as they acquire necessities to carry on toward sanctuary. Unknown to each other, both teens head for the same source for miniataure tools, inventions, and other equipment to make living "in the small" feasible. Filled with supernatural horror, blood-curdling tension, and brilliant artwork, the novel embodies hopefulness with a hint of more disaster to come.</p> <p>Judith A. Hayn Little Rock, AR</p>	<p><b><i>Into the Dark: An Echo Falls Mystery</i></b> by Peter Abrahams Laura Geringer Books (imprint of HarperCollins) 2008, 300 pp., \$20.89 ISBN: 978-0-06-073709-2</p> <p>With her love of Holmesian deduction and wordplay, thirteen-year-old Ingrid sleuths into a dark past, searching out secrets to save Grampy from an unjust murder accusation. Braver than Buffy and twice as believable, Ingrid convincingly walks the neverland between adolescence and adulthood in this third book in the Echo Falls Mysteries series.</p> <p>Edgar Award nominee Abrahams artfully blends humor, history, intelligence, and suspense to create just-right prose that keeps the pages turning without ever seeming artificial. Pre-teen and early teen readers, male and female, will identify with Ingrid's family problems and disregard for school, yet admire her gutsy cleverness.</p> <p>Judy Beemer Milford, KS</p>

<p><b><i>Last Chance for First</i></b> by Tom Hazuka Brown Barn Books, 2008, 296 pp., \$8.95</p> <p>Relationships/Identity/Sports ISBN: 978-0-9798824-0-1</p> <p>In a mad mix of high school relationship conflicts, peer pressure, following in his older brother's footsteps, and striving to be the star of his soccer team, junior Robbie Fielder takes on his junior year at Northbrook High. Fielder finds himself torn between living up to jock expectations of his harassing coach and the opportunity for a college scholarship, and going against popularity by falling more and more for the new girl who seems to be an outcast.</p> <p>Hazuka captures the essence of a teenager's action packed high school life where making choices and learning how to be yourself go hand in hand. Everything from drunk driving to nagging parents are smartly intertwined into a well written story from the point of view of an everyday, likable high school student.</p> <p>Melissa DeWitt Manhattan, KS</p>	<p><b><i>Little Audrey</i></b> by Ruth White Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008, 160 pp., \$16.00</p> <p>Coal Mining/History/Appalachia ISBN: 978-0-374-34580-8</p> <p>No young adult writer paints a better portrait of life in the Appalachian Mountains than Ruth White, author of the Newbery Honor book, <i>Belle Prater's Boy</i>. White's latest effort represents her most autobiographical work to date. Narrating her story through the voice of Audrey, her older sister, Ruth travels back to the summer of 1948, a time in which she, her two sisters, and her parents were living in Jewell Valley, a coal mining camp in southwestern Virginia, and a time that changed her life forever.</p> <p>The reader learns Audrey has just recovered from scarlet fever. Rail thin, she is teased by boys and girls in the camp, but has a close friend in Virgil, a young boy who recently moved to the camp from Kentucky. Audrey's father, a miner, drinks heavily and spends much of his paycheck on alcohol. Her mother is haunted by the loss of an infant child and struggles to feed the family—many days they go without.</p> <p>An extraordinary addition to the literature on life in the Appalachian coal mining communities of the mid-1900s and a must read in social studies.</p> <p>Pam B. Cole Kennesaw, GA</p>
<p><b><i>Love in the Corner Pocket</i></b> by Marlene Perez Point, Imprint of Scholastic, 2008, 230 pp., \$17.89</p> <p>Coming of Age/Friendship ISBN: 978-0-545-01991-0</p> <p>Chloe McBride is completely confident when it comes to shooting pool. Gino's restaurant, with its well-used pool tables, is like a second home. With a cue stick in her hand, all of the complications of her Laguna Beach life take a back seat; her parents' separation, her less than perfect figure, and her gorgeous best friend. But when Gino's handsome nephew Alex appears on the scene, Chloe finds her concentration broken. When Alex shows an interest in getting to know her, her gorgeous best friend shows an interest in Alex and Chloe's life becomes even more complicated.</p> <p>As the story unfolds, Chloe must face the possibility of reconciliation between her parents, the unraveling of a friendship, and the realization that change is an inevitable part of life. Upper middle school and high school will relate to the questions of loyalty and friendship that emerge in this novel.</p> <p>Vicki Sherbert Wakefield, KS</p>	<p><b><i>Me, the Missing, and the Dead</i></b> by Jenny Valentine Harper Teen, 2007, 201 pp., \$17.89</p> <p>Family Relationships ISBN: 978-0-06-085069-2</p> <p>The first novel by British author Jenny Valentine is a carefully crafted portrait of a 15-year-old protagonist's search to learn about the father, who abandoned his family several years earlier. This quest begins with Lucas Swain's unlikely discovery of an urn containing the ashes of an elderly woman sitting on a shelf in the offices of a cab company. Immediately drawn to this woman, Lucas learns that she was abandoned in the back seat of a cab. With the help of his grandmother, Lucas takes possession of the ashes, and this mysterious woman in the urn seems intent on telling Lucas something. What he learns will change everything.</p> <p><i>Me, the Missing, and the Dead</i> is a compelling study of a group of family relationships. The characters are well-developed, and the book offers adolescents an insight into the complex psychological workings of a dysfunctional family.</p> <p>Jenny Valentine is an author to watch.</p> <p>F. Todd Goodson Manhattan, KS</p>

<p><b><i>Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit</i></b> translated by Cathy Hirano</p> <p>Arthur A. Levine Books, 2008, 248 pp. \$17.99</p> <p><i>Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit</i>, translated by Cathy Hirano, is the first of the <i>Moribito</i> series, consisting of ten books, to become available in the United States. Since their release in Japan, the books have sold millions of copies and won widespread praise. It is currently being adapted for a major television series.</p> <p>After a chance encounter with Chagum, the Second Prince of New Yogo, Balsa, a legendary female bodyguard, finds herself responsible for his life. This proves to be the greatest challenge Balsa has yet to face, as the prince's life is threatened by his own father, the Mikado, and his pack of vicious hunters. Roaming the Japanese countryside in search of safety, Balsa and Chagum gather bits and pieces of disturbing history and legend as they come to learn more about the demon within the prince and the Mikado's sinister plan to destroy it.</p> <p>Full of stylish action, <i>Moribito</i> will quickly entrance fans of manga and Japanese martial arts. The violence is mild, and Uehashi delivers her tale in a vocabulary appropriate for younger and older readers alike.</p> <p>Jordin Brown Rogers, AR</p>	<p><b><i>Slam</i></b> by Nick Hornby</p> <p>G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2007, 309 pp., \$19.99</p> <p>Fifteen-year-old Sam lives in London, skates at the Bowl (that's skateboarding to you and me), and talks to a poster of Tony Hawk everyday. His mum finally gets rid of a stale boyfriend, his teachers think he should pursue art in college, and skating with his chums Rabbit and Rubbish is never better. Then he meets Alicia, a gorgeous daughter of one of his mum's friends who is way out of his league.</p> <p><i>Slam</i> explores what it means to grow up without all the answers readily available to you. With its introspective narrative pacing, quirky characters, elements of magic realism, and heavy dose of wit and humor, this novel is a wonderful option for reluctant teenage male readers—girls will like Alicia's character as well. In a long line of "problem" novels, <i>Slam</i> delivers glimmers of hope in a sometimes dramatic and complicated world.</p> <p>Jacob Stratman Siloam Springs, AR</p>
<p><b><i>Smiles to Go</i></b> by Jerry Spinelli</p> <p>HarperCollins, 2008, 250 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Ninth-grader Will Tuppence loves science, skateboarding, stargazing, and chess. He is obsessed with proton decay, the afterlife, and other mysteries of the universe—and frustrated with his mischief-making younger sister, Tabby. Will is caught up in a love triangle with his two best friends Mi-Su and BT and much of the story revolves around Will's feelings of unrequited love for Mi-Su. A parallel love story plays out between five-year-old Korbet Finn, a next-door neighbor madly in love with Tabby. Tabby rejects Korbet, but Korbet remains persistent. The plot turns on a tragic event that forces Will to ponder solipsism—the belief that the self is the only reality.</p> <p>Spinelli hits another home run with sidesplitting humor, spot-on characterization, and exceptional voice. Philosophical and scientific questions abound: What happens to matter if protons die? Will everything disappear? What about infinity? Does stuff become nonstuff? Is heaven a dimension? Superb choice for the science and mathematics classrooms.</p> <p>Pam B. Cole Kennesaw, GA</p>	<p><b><i>Snow Falling in Spring: Coming of Age in China during the Cultural Revolution</i></b> by Moying Li</p> <p>Melanie Kroupa Books, 2008, 176 pp., \$16.00</p> <p>ISBN: 978-0-374-39922-1</p> <p>Coming of age in 20<sup>th</sup> Century China, Moying Li's memoir illuminates the power of the human spirit to rise above adversity. Through her own childhood memories, Li recounts her family's survival through China's "Great Leap Forward," the Red Guard, and, ultimately, the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Li's character is molded by her grandmother's unconditional love and her father's profound faith in the power of education. It is through their teachings that Li navigates the turbulent waters of change.</p> <p>Li's unpretentious prose gently reveals the unreasonable demands placed upon the Chinese people across multiple generations. In a moving account of how her people not only survived, but rose above treacherous adversity, Li renews the reader's faith in the powers of both love and knowledge. A poignant literary account of cultural evolution.</p> <p>Patricia E. Ackerman Abilene, KS</p>

<p><b><i>Stealing Heaven</i></b> by Elizabeth Scott Harper Teen, 2008, 320 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Fiction/Crime ISBN: 978-0-06-112280-4</p> <p>Stealing is all Danielle knows. She and her mother have been breaking into houses for as long as she can remember. Moving from town to town, finding just the right house to rob, and fencing their “finds,” Danielle knows no other way of life. Her mother yearns for silver, but Danielle longs for something just a little more “normal.”</p> <p>It’s only after she and her mother land in a small beach town called Heaven that Danielle actually makes a friend for the first time in her life. Also, she meets a guy who is interested in her and seems nice, but who also happens to be a cop. Heaven, a place where the beach homes are as majestic as the name of the town, seems to be a place where Danielle could actually settle down and have a real life, which is something she’s always dreamed of having. Will she throw that all away and continue the life she’s always known?</p> <p>Jennifer Lee Louisville, KY</p>	<p><b><i>Steel Trap: The Challenge</i></b> by Ridley Pearson Disney Editions, 2008, 324 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Mystery/Thriller ISBN: 978-1-4231-0640-1</p> <p>In his latest publication, <i>Steel Trap: The Challenge</i>, Ridley Pearson introduces a unique character named Steven “Steel” Trapp. Steel is an inquisitive young man who is blessed and plagued with a remarkable photographic memory. Motivated by his father’s love for science, Steel invents a device he calls FIDDOE—the Fully Integrated Digital Oder Evaluator—and, his new invention places him as a finalist in the National Science Challenge. While on his way to compete in the science challenge, Steel quickly finds himself in the middle of a dreadful plot after he attempts to return a missing briefcase to its rightful owner. With his new friend Kaleigh, Steel attempts to put the pieces of this thrilling mystery together while trying to stay one step ahead of the federal agents.</p> <p><i>Steel Trap: The Challenge</i> will appeal to readers across the board. The author’s direct approach to mystery writing and the overarching themes of teamwork and problem solving make it a great option for both advanced and struggling readers.</p> <p>Matthew G. Skillen Manhattan, KS</p>
<p><b><i>Waiting for Normal</i></b> by Leslie Connor HarperCollins, 2008, 290 pp., \$17.89</p> <p>Family/Growing up ISBN: 978-0-06-089088-9</p> <p>Twelve-year-old Addie is used to taking care of herself. Her mother is unstable, unreliable, and mostly absent, and she has been separated from her stepfather and little sisters. As Addie adjusts to a new life in a small trailer under a bridge in Schenectady, New York, she realizes that the thing she really wants is to just be normal.</p> <p>In this novel, we meet a heroine in a young girl whose future seems anything but bright. Connor introduces us to Addie, a ray of sunshine in the dismal world around her. Addie’s optimism, sensitivity, and honesty bring joy to the people she meets. As you read this sincere though heart-wrenching novel, you will feel yourself wishing, more than anything, a “normal” life for Addie.</p> <p>Sarah de Verges Fayetteville, AR</p>	<p><b><i>Publishers who wish to submit a book for possible review should send a copy of the book to:</i></b></p> <p><b><i>Lori Goodson 409 Cherry Circle Manhattan, KS 66503</i></b></p> <p><b><i>To submit a review for possible publication or to become a reviewer, contact Lori Goodson at <a href="mailto:lagoodson@cox.net">lagoodson@cox.net</a></i></b></p>

the abandoned child wanting her father back. And Berry's story turns on the fulcrum of this scene. Her father may be tongue-tied, but she's beginning to speak out and thus her character to change and grow. Later, she even begins searching for "some simple thing that would connect us" (97), as she spends more time with her father. But as Berry's understanding grows, Myles becomes more of a disappointment, and the true test of Berry's maturity is coming to terms with her father's weaknesses.

During their last days together, on a tour of the wine country, they meet Suzanne, a racist hotel hostess. Myles is blatantly attracted to Suzanne, and Berry, repulsed, is thrown into a final emotional crisis. Deserted by her father even when he's physically present, (and exhibiting what Simpson terms in abandoned children an acute loneliness and preoccupation with death), Berry feels she is "missing something—or something is missing inside me—that's how it feels. What? Home? If I were there right now, I'd reach for my pile of stones" (121).

She recalls the cruel moment at Laura's funeral when her father hung around Laura's attractive friend and "with so much sadness hanging over everything, he would still check out her ass" (123), and realizes that even Laura "being his favorite didn't count for all that much" (135). Finally, the stones Berry has collected over the months truly have entered her heart and "weigh[s] too much" (136).

When Myles takes off with Suzanne and leaves a frightened Berry alone in the motel, she's again the abandoned child, but this time she's come far enough emotionally to recognize her choice: she can be held down by her feelings of betrayal, or accept her father as he is and grow past that betrayal. Berry's fear sends her to the liquor cabinet, then into a rage. By the time Myles returns, she's ready to confront him.

Berry berates Myles for watching out for her only when it "fits into your schedule," and gains his admission that he does the best

he can, and it is "clearly, often [. . .] not enough" (145). With her father's admission Berry understands that Myles does love her, but that his love won't sustain her. And she's matured enough through the novel that she can now separate from him. She's come of age because she no longer believes in the magic of getting back what could have been. In acknowledging Myles' fall from grace, Berry takes the first steps toward healing.

In Shakespeare's day, King Lear could cast out his loving daughter Cordelia simply because she dared to give "half" her love to her mate, rather than save it all for Lear. In the end, though, noble Cordelia was still willing to sacrifice herself (all thought of her lover gone) to save her father. While at first glance such a solution seems incredible in modern times, *The Father-Daughter Dance* notes that abandoned or neglected daughters are still quick to sacrifice everything for the return of their derelict fathers (113). In other words, Berry could have chosen, like Louisa May Alcott, to be the good and dutiful daughter. She could have bought into her father's version of who he wanted her to be. Instead, the ending of *Many Stones* reflects a new solution for today's new literary orphan, and Berry comes of age despite her father's failures.

We seem to have no control as young adults, but we are looking for it. And what we learn from good stories is that through struggle we can control our thoughts and actions. Yet in stories about relationships such as the father/child dynamic, it goes beyond giving a sense of power to the main character.

Every child has a need, at some point, to separate from the parent; it's part of growing up, and every life has its version of the coming of age tale. But when you've been emotionally or spiritually "orphaned," letting go is a trial by fire. Gone is the emotional grounding which comes with a healthy family. In its place, the child hero must fight the ghosts left behind by poor parenting, and one of those ghosts is what could have been.

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Child characters who fight these ghosts create their own answers from the ground up, without a firm foundation, and just how they navigate through the father/child dynamic drives the plot and creates a special coming of age story for today's young readers, as we've seen in *Many Stones*. And while such contemporary novels offer new directions, they speak to the past as well.

The search for the absent parent is one of the oldest stories in the world, and the evolution of the absent father story has its roots in the traditional orphan story, which made a long and arduous journey out of silence and onto the pages of such literary figures as Dickens, Twain and Alcott. "Children need to get from the stories they read a sense of their own inner existence," says Aiken, "and the archetypal links that connect them with the unexplored past: of the similarity in patterns between large and small, old and new [. . .]" (17).

The father/child dynamic holds these patterns and archetypal links within its dance, and stories fashioned from its patterns for today's young readers can both incorporate the past and create something new, until our fiction is, as Jane Yolen says, "*reality surprised*. It shakes us up and makes us see familiar things in new ways" (27). And part of surprising reality for those of us who write is allowing that kernel of real experience to leak from pen to page. The more deeply we examine experience, the more profound and meaningful our fiction, the more it will resonate with others.

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As Wallace Stegner says, "The best times I know are the times when some raw crystal of experience, my own or something I have observed, is being ground down and faceted and polished so that it reflects light and meaning" (121). You take that light and meaning where it's found, in the polish of raw crystal, or the glint of a tiny key.

*Zu Vincent* is the author of *The Lucky Place (Front Street, 2008)*. Her short stories have appeared in publications from Harcourt, Signet, BenBella Books, and Plume. Her work has also appeared in Harper's, Yoga Journal, and Fine Homebuilding. Ms. Vincent holds an MFA in Writing from Vermont College. She lives in Forest Ranch, California.

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# Stories of Teen Mothers:

Fiction and Nonfiction

In my 2002 *The ALAN Review* article, “Strong Portraits and Stereotypes: Pregnant and Mothering Teens in YA Fiction,” I analyzed six out of twenty young adult novels about pregnant teens and teen mothers; I described the “discourses of desire” (Fine, 1988) that could be found in the novels, and laid out ways in which teachers might help their students read and critique them. Since that time I’ve set up a book club for a small group of teen mothers trying to finish high school; with these young women I’ve been reading and writing and talking about three young adult novels about teen mothers. I hoped, in this recent research (part of a larger investigation into the school and literacy lives of teen mothers) to see if what I had speculated about in my 2002 *ALAN Review* article was true. I asked about the ways in which it might be helpful for teen mothers to read about pregnant teens and teen mothers in young adult literature. Might they be more motivated to read if the subject was young women like themselves? Would reading such stories help them critique and thus live more easily with the pernicious discourses through which society views them? Could reading and talking about this literature with me help the young mothers think through their relationships to men, to parents, and to their own sexuality? How close to their own lives would the young women find the stories we read? Finally, would the readers identify with the teen mothers in these stories at all?

In this article I want to present some of the findings from my recent investigations. The novels I consider here are *Imani All Mine* by Connie Porter (1999), *Make Lemonade* by Virginia Euwer Wolf

(1993), and *A Dance for Three* by Louise Plummer (2000). In this article I plan to use Wendy Luttrell’s *Pregnant Bodies, Fertile Minds: Gender, Race, and the Schooling of Pregnant Teens* (2003), and Deirdre Kelly’s *Pregnant with Meaning: Teen Mothers and the Politics of Inclusive Schooling* (2000) to point out some of the common discourses about the causes of teen pregnancy I discovered in these three novels. I plan also to analyze the stories based on Roberta Seelinger Trites’ book of literary criticism *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Young Adult Literature* (2000). I plan mostly, however, to describe the reactions of three teenaged mothers—Angel, Casey, and Brenda—(all pseudonyms chosen by the young women themselves) to the three novels, thereby placing the writers’ imagined lives of teen mothers up against the real lives of the young mothers with whom I worked. Finally, I plan to suggest some ways in which teachers might use novels like these in conversations and classes with teen mothers and other students.

But first, some background.

## The Discourses

In her 2007 *ALAN Review* article, “Facts and Fictions: Teen Pregnancy in Young Adult Literature,” Kristin Nichols writes that though my 2002 article and others she considers—by writers like Davis and McGillivray, and Cockett and Knetzer—“do examine stereotypes related to teen pregnancy and/or parenthood presented in selected literature, and while they do mention information missing in the literature they

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have analyzed, the authors do not provide a comprehensive look at the portrayal of teen pregnancy and/or parenting compared to this reality in the United States today” (2007). Nichols read over forty young adult novels about teen pregnancy and, in her article, reviews ones that were published after 1990, that are told from the teen mothers’ perspective, and that she believes will engage the reader. Nichols writes that a majority of the novels she has read do not discuss teen parents’ difficult financial lives or the difficulty of raising a

baby as a single parent. She writes:

Overall, then, the picture of teen parenting presented in the novels is more positive than the reality of being a teen parent. The authors of the novels do illustrate some of the difficulties teen parents face, but they focus on changes in social life and sleep patterns more than anything else. While, in reality, parenting teens are in danger of abusing their children, Tasha (*Imani All Mine*) is the only teen protagonist in this study who takes her frustrations out on her child. Since many of the teen protagonists in these novels are from middle class families, and since many of the families agree to help support the teens and their children, most of the teen protagonists do not have the financial concerns that many teen parents actually face.

I agree with Nichols: most of the YA novels I have read, for this article and for “Strong Portraits and Stereotypes,” seem to me to be overly positive about the lives teen mothers lead. I think these novels tend to be overly simplistic about the causes of teen pregnancy as well. In their recent research about teen mothers, Professors Deirdre Kelly and Wendy Luttrell describe four different discourses commonly used to explain the reasons for teen pregnancy. These discourses are associated with different groups concerned with the issue; each group sees different reasons for, and different solutions to the “problem” of teenage mothering. Each of these overly simple discourses can be found in the YA novels that I read with Angel,

Casey, and Gabriel.

Some people concerned with the lives of teenaged mothers speak through what Kelly (2000) calls a “wrong-girl” frame (74). This discourse suggests that there is something wrong with the girl, that she is rebellious or confused, without goals, overly sexual or irresponsible in the way she thinks about relationships, parenting, boys, or her body. This is the dominant discourse around teenage pregnancy and motherhood; it holds the most power of the four listed here. This is a difficult discourse to unravel not only because it holds some truth, as all of these discourses do, but because it includes a discourse of “people who make bad choices” (Kelly 47) that attempts to separate the deed from the doer in a way that seems to be well-motivated. This discourse is damaging because, as Luttrell states, it tends to “distort our understanding of how social conditions and cultural forces converge to create isolation, troubled relationships, and little support for many teenage girls (but especially girls born into poverty) at a pivotal point in their lives” (27). This distortion is an example of the insidiousness of the ideology—the discourse, if you will—of individualism and of the lack of complexity of our understanding of how poverty affects psychology. In addition, this discourse does not take into account the many and conflicting messages young women receive about sexuality today; it does not take into account the ways young women and girls are “eroticized” in every day life (Luttrell 33).

The “wrong society frame” (Kelly 79, Luttrell 27) is one first expressed by feminists; this discourse speaks not only to young women’s lack of access to birth control methods and delivery systems but also expresses a cultural struggle over “proper family-government relationships” (Luttrell 35). This discourse takes issue with the notion of individual choices, arguing that choices are highly dependent on a girl’s material resources and the cultural meanings she makes of sex, pregnancy, and early motherhood. Rather than identifying the flaw as being in the girl, this discourse focuses on unequal power relationships across class and gender as a framework through which teenage motherhood can be seen.

Those who speak through a “wrong-family frame” (Kelly 76, Luttrell 27) say that the family is at fault: the family of the pregnant teen has raised their daughter badly. This construction dates back to the 1960s and

the Moynihan Report which spoke of the problems of the black family; this construction also connects to the culture of poverty discourse that describes undeserving mothers who are on welfare and criminal, absent fathers. As Columbia University education professor Nancy Lesko (1995), quoted in Luttrell (2003), put it, this discourse has been used as “part of a broad social engineering toward reprivatization and dismantlement of the welfare state support of women and children” (Luttrell 34).

Finally, there are some teenage mothers who claim that any stigma about having children out of wedlock is wrong. Kelly (2000) and others (Luttrell, 2003; Schultz, 2001) have described teen mothers’ self interpretations as emphasizing the positive and empowering aspects of their situations. University of Pennsylvania education professor Kathy Schultz describes the ways three girls she got to know turn “failure into success” as they struggle with the discourses about teenage mothering, discourses that affect the ways they see themselves as well as the way society sees them. Schultz sees that—as with the young women I spoke to—“a consequence of having children at a young age can lead to new forms of participation in school” (Schultz 595).

## The Study

I worked with Angel, Casey, and Brenda for about five hours every other week during the spring and summer semesters of 2003. During that time we met at the Midwestern alternative school or “learning center” with which they were or had been associated: all three young women were trying to finish high school. During our meetings we read and talked about young adult novels together, shared stories, photos of our children, and news of our days. Over the two semesters I worked with these young women I accumulated 75 pages of field notes; I tape recorded all of our meetings. During this time I also interviewed teachers and administrators about their perspectives on these teen mothers and others with whom they worked; I received documents including information about the teen mothers’ school attendance and academic progress as well. In addition, I conducted and tape recorded over 15 hours of individual interviews with each of the young women I worked with. In order to complicate my findings, I conducted multiple hour-

long interviews with two older women who were pregnant as teenagers in the 1960s and ’70s. I learned about these women’s experiences with school, with their families, and with reading as well.

Of the young women with whom I worked, Angel, a seventeen-year-old white girl from Georgia, was the youngest. Living in a trailer with her bartender mother, she was unmarried, taking two classes, and caring for her ten-month-old son Ben. She was not very far along toward graduation: administrators said she was doing seventh-grade math; in English she was about at the tenth-grade level. Angel liked to write poetry, though not in school; she was eager to read almost anything, she told me.

Nineteen years old and newly married when I met her, Casey, a white girl who had been in and out of foster homes as a child, had a three-month-old son named Russell. Casey had supported herself as a maid at a local hotel before she married. Not enrolled in the school when I knew her, she planned on re-enrolling at the alternative school the next semester and working toward entering college. Administrative records suggested it would take her years to accomplish that goal.

I met Brenda four weeks before she graduated from high school. A white woman who worked full time at a local factory, she was twenty-three years old and had three children, a four-year-old and two-year-old twins. At the time that I met her, she was six months pregnant and still married to the father of her children, though she had not lived with him for many years. Older than many of the students at the alternative school, she was often critical of the ways in which she felt they were wasting their time.

## The Books

Each of the young adult novels I chose to read with the young women for this study is, unlike most of the novels Nichols critiqued, about a girl who is poor. In two of the novels the teen mother keeps her child, and some of the difficulties of raising that child

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**During our meetings we read and talked about young adult novels together, shared stories, photos of our children, and news of our days.**

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are shown. I chose the novels because I wanted ones that described a life fairly close to the ones the young women I was working with were leading; I also chose them because I suspected they would be easy for the young women to read—important, as the young women with whom I worked had busy lives.

### Imani All Mine

At our first meeting I read part of Connie Porter's novel *Imani All Mine* (1999) aloud to the young women. This is not a novel written expressly for

young adults (although Porter has written novels for young people, most specifically the *Addy* books in the American Girl series); its implied reader is not necessarily a young person, though its heroine is fourteen. In this novel Tasha is shown trying to raise her daughter Imani in a housing project. She struggles with school, with her mother and her mother's white boyfriend, and with the difficult circumstances under which she must live.

This novel—with its description of an urban environment where Tasha and her mother sit on their stoop watching “June Bug” train little boys to become

drug runners for him, with its description of the bravery and moral courage of Tasha, who tries to care for Imani well even though she is the product of a rape, and especially with its description of Imani's death through random gunfire—participates in the “society is wrong” discourse (Kelly 79, Luttrell 27). It also participates in the “stigma is wrong” discourse (Luttrell 29): when, at the end of *Imani All Mine*, Tasha decides to have a second child out of wedlock, this decision is presented as a hopeful one, not as the choice of a confused or bad girl, or a girl who is a product of a bad home, but as an expression of the

triumph of youth over sorrow. This novel is the only one of all of those that I have read that participates in the “stigma is wrong” discourse.

After I finished reading the first two chapters of the book to Casey and Angel, the girls talked about it with excitement and vibrancy to their voices. Casey said, “Fourteen. So, yeah, I was scared when I found out too, like she was too,” and, later,

It was smart of her not to get rid of the baby, not having an abortion. And then I thought it was smart of her to start going to those classes. I wish I would have done that. And I—just like Imani thought her baby had a routine before he was born I thought Russ did, too. Oh and she mentioned how her stomach didn't stick out all that much, mine did. It was way out to there.

The girls were familiar with aspects of the story in *Imani All Mine*; having recently entered the world of teen motherhood, they were predisposed to be interested in and positive about this story. Eager to talk about their experiences—the bottles, late night feedings, diapers, doctor visits, and the strange experiences of pregnancy and labor—they had background knowledge that may have made listening to and reading this novel easier than listening to and reading texts on other subjects; the girls seemed as if they could, to some extent, find themselves in Porter's description of Tasha (Vinz 77).

I read a short section in which Tasha's mother takes her to a female doctor, who chastises her for being pregnant: “too many of our girls throwing they lives away, giving up on they futures,” the doctor says (22). I wondered if the teen mothers had experienced any prejudice from the doctors they saw when they were pregnant. Casey defended her doctor, but Angel said: “Some people, yeah, especially, like—middling people, not real young people and not real old people but, like-middle-ish people—they look at me, like if I'm in the grocery store with Ben, like that doctor was to Tasha, like they think I'm a slut or something. Yeah.”

The girls were excited about *Imani All Mine*; Angel copied down its name. Later she asked me its title again: “What book was that you read us last week?” And, when I told her I thought she could get it out of the library, she said, “You didn't make us copies?”

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## Make Lemonade

### *The Personal Reader*

Next, I asked Casey, Angel, and Brenda to read *Make Lemonade*. Following Aidan Chambers as discussed in Nodelman's *Pleasures of Children's Literature* (2003), I asked them to take notes on anything in the novel they liked, disliked, were puzzled by and noticed as a pattern (48). I asked the young women to take these notes in part because I wanted them to talk back to the text as they read, which might help them be more engaged, and might aid in comprehension (Schoenbach, 1999, 33); I asked them to answer these questions in part because I wanted them to have as pleasurable an experience as possible.

In *Make Lemonade*, the main character Verna LaVaughn decides to babysit for Jolly, a teenage mother, because she wants to earn money so she can go to college and get out of her building in which "in 64 apartments nobody ever went to college" (10). Through working for Jolly, Verna learns a bit about what life is like for a teenage mother, as she watches Jolly struggle with toilet training, with a job loss, with sexual harassment on the job, with a dirty house, and with bills.

The character Verna LaVaughn is a first-person narrator whose knowledge is limited; though she has power in that she is the teller and shaper of the story, unlike an omniscient narrator, she can only describe the limited knowledge that one person can have (Seelinger Trites, 2000, 71). Though Verna has a direct relationship with the implied adolescent readers of the novel (72), many of the values she relays are learned by both the reader and by Verna from her mother, a character who can be seen as an "interior narrator" (72), because she sees some parts of the story that the main teller cannot. Verna's mother "voices the didactic ideology" (74) of the novel, through her conversations with and warnings to her daughter. Jolly, the teen mother, is one of those characters that Seelinger Trites finds odd (61) because, though they have no parents in the novel, which one might imagine would be an adolescent's dream, they look for

and find a parent to rebel against. In this case Jolly initially rebels against the advice of Verna's mother, who seems to use her adult authority to repress and undercut the little power that Jolly has. Although I voiced some criticisms of the mother character, all of the young women liked and defended her. Angel in particular saw her as being "very caring." "She's going to help pay for the college a little bit," said Angel, "that's very caring."

Verna's mother wields a power that undercuts the authority of her daughter's narrative voice which, Seelinger Trites suggests, also undercuts the power of the adolescent reader, implying as it does that only adults can have wisdom (79). Jolly brings herself out of powerlessness (79) in part by following some of Verna's mother's suggestions. Jolly gains power also by aligning herself fully with the institution of school. In this novel succumbing to the power of the institution of school (33) is presented as the beginning of adult wisdom, and, unlike most schools outside of fiction, the school Jolly finally attends presents both girls with many kinds of help: not just a daycare center but a financial aid seminar (Wolf 118), a self-esteem class (86), an Apprentice Program (126), encouragement to go to college (118) as well as teachers (118) and counselors (124) who have plenty of time to help their students think through and solve their personal problems.

All three of the young women who read this novel with me said that Jolly seemed to them to be true to life. "I know people just like that," said Casey. "This young guy Rich I knew, the boys' mom was in prison, I mean they had dishes stacked up to here and Rich didn't even give those boys a bath. I mean, it was just gross. There were times I'd come over and give them a bath. I mean, just like this girl in this book, it's really hard to be a young parent."

As I asked her to, Angel annotated her copy of *Make Lemonade*. On her copy she circled the words "drab" and "diagram," and wrote "don't know" beside them; after a line in the text that says "the tabs" of the teenage mother's babysitting advertisement have not been taken by anyone, Angel wrote, "shows that a lot of

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people don't care about teen moms." After certain things the toddler character says, Angel wrote, "cute!" At a different point Angel wrote "just like most friends—not supportive." In one paragraph the teenage mother Jolly says, "Reality is I got baby puke on my sweater and shoes/and they tell me they'll cut off the electricity/and my kids would have to take a bath in cold water/And the rent ain't paid like usual./Reality is my babies only got one thing in the whole world and that's me and that's reality." Angel circled that paragraph and wrote "ain't that the truth."

None of the teenage mothers who read this novel immediately identified with the teen mother Jolly, though, as they had identified with the teen mother who tells the story of *Imani All Mine*; primarily, when they read *Make Lemonade*, they identified with the younger, inexperienced girl, Verna, who is the first-person narrator of the story. The young women were, then, conventional readers, reading as the text asked them to. Because I was surprised that they didn't identify with the teen mother more than they did, I asked Angel directly about whether she saw herself as being like Jolly in any way. Angel answered, "Oh, struggling, I guess, we're both struggling. Except I'm a lot neater. Except when it comes to my car and my bedroom. But—I don't have two kids, but I don't have a job, either. But like that girl I want to give Ben more than I can but I don't have a job so I know I can't."

Brenda, who was older than most of the young women she went to school with, was critical of the teen mother, using her to defend her own moral self and to express her ideas about what a life well-lived entails. Brenda criticized Jolly using the same words she used for other teen mothers she knew: "She shouldn't be having kids just to have kids cause she thinks that they're cute, I think that's what that Jolly is doing, they don't tell you if she's black or white but I know a lot of them just having kids, saying, oh I want a mixed baby because they're so cute."

Not surprisingly, this personal way of responding to the text was the girls' most common response. In this novel in which the teen mother did not tell her

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own story, the teen mother readers identified primarily as the text asked them to, with the younger main character, the teller of the story, Verna LaVaughn.

#### **The Helpless Reader**

Casey's husband Sam was trying to help her learn how to become a better reader; at twenty-five, a manager at the local Menard's, Sam had two years of college behind him and, as Casey said, "read lots of books, just tons of books." His goal was to help Casey graduate from high school and go through college. When he

learned that Casey was reading *Make Lemonade* in a book club with me, Sam asked her to read it out loud to him every night. They read sitting together on their couch, with their baby Russ in a car seat next to them. In describing her reading to me, Casey said she enjoyed how emotional her husband became at some parts of the book, for example:

when the baby gets the spider caught in her throat. I mean he was scared, he didn't want her to die . . . it was so funny, and he said why, it's not funny! But I kept reading, and he's like, why don't you go back, and I'm like, no! I want to find out! But he got all upset, he like, was almost crying. Russ was there next to us when I was reading and I could see Sam was thinking about him, about what could happen to him, just like when the baby almost died. I laughed at him but. . . I was getting kind of emotional too.

Casey and her husband were clearly feeling that "helplessness native to reading" that Andrew H. Miller (2002) writes of when he describes readers who feel "perfectly helpless" as they watch characters make bad choices that will lead them or those they love to danger (81). Some part of Casey and Sam's intense reactivity to this scene in the novel—particularly Sam's tears—is an expression of that helplessness, and also of their growing awareness of their powerlessness as parents. As Casey and Sam read together they were aware of the many discourses that told them that young parents can not possibly be good enough; they imagined what could happen to their baby son if they were not vigilant parents. Casey sometimes seemed irritated by the way in which the young adult novels

we read claimed to know who she was as a teenage mother (Blackford, 2004, 40). She made it clear that she did not see herself in Jolly and was not particularly interested in knowing her. But in this one case she seemed to experience no distance: she and Sam were right there with Jolly, experiencing the panic of having a baby who nearly chokes to death.

The novel *Make Lemonade* participates in many of the discourses that surround and try to explain teenage mothering. In that a character in *Make Lemonade* calls Jolly a “magnet for bad luck” (73), it participates in the “wrong girl” discourse (Kelly 74). In that it foregrounds Jolly’s poverty, *Make Lemonade* also participates in a “wrong society” discourse; in that Jolly’s family is nowhere to be found, it participates in a “wrong family” discourse.

### A Dance for Three

Some weeks after the group finished reading *Make Lemonade*, I read *A Dance for Three* (2000) by Louise Plummer with Angel, at her suggestion. When I called her from work to say happy birthday—she had just turned eighteen—Angel volunteered, “I read an interesting book myself, *A Dance for Three*. It’s about a girl who gets pregnant. Her name is Hannah and the guy is Milo and she gets pregnant and waits three months to tell him and when she does he punches her right in the face. Then she goes crazy and is in a mental hospital. It’s real good.”

*A Dance for Three* is a book about a girl in trouble. Written by a professor of English who says she decided to write the book when a relative of hers became pregnant out of wedlock, it strives to show how unwanted pregnancy can be related to a host of other problems a young person might be having. There is of course some truth to this idea that girls who get pregnant early are often girls with other problems: One of my teacher informants said that most of the five hundred teen mothers she had taught over the years had become pregnant after some tragedy had happened in their lives: “A grandmother died, there was a divorce, a serious breakup. It was amazing, the connections were so clear,” this teacher said. This connection was confirmed in conversations with older teenage mothers who, looking back, claimed that they started “acting wild” when their grandmother died or their father left home.

Seeking, I think, to show a teenage mother in a

compassionate and more complicated light, *A Dance for Three* speaks to this pattern of pregnancy after tragedy or loss, as none of the other books mentioned so far in this essay have. The character Hannah is dealing with grief over the death of her father, and with her mother’s agoraphobic response to that death; she falls in love with the no-good (but good-looking) male character in the novel when he sings a song her father had sung to her (Plummer 35).

*A Dance for Three* is one of those books that participates primarily in the “wrong girl frame” (Kelly, 47; Luttrell 27); like that discourse, the novel is complex because its author is trying to show compassion for the confused teenage narrator who makes some bad choices. This novel is also one that serves “both to reflect and perpetuate the cultural mandate that teenagers rebel against their parents” (Seelinger Trites 69); it clearly presents Hannah’s pregnancy as a form of deviance, and it shows the main character in a “rebellion/repression dynamic” as she learns to accept the institutions—the family, the school, the mental hospital—that shape her life (69). This novel is clearly another “tool of socialization” (54) in which the narrator rebels by becoming pregnant and having a nervous breakdown and then, through the help of a surrogate mother figure, (in this case a therapist) accepts the importance of institutions in her life, and becomes a person ready to accept conventional, adult life.

But the book is unusual in that it speaks to an issue none of the other YA novels I’ve read addresses: the pain an unwanted pregnancy can create for other members of the family. It is as if, in most of these books, the main characters’ lives do not affect the lives of the people they live around. In *A Dance for Three*, however, the brother of the father of the baby goes to see it in the hospital and mourns its loss when

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it's adopted, saying that "Uncles have no rights" (Plummer 218). One of the older women I spoke to for my study, Jennifer, who became pregnant out of wedlock when she was in high school, told me that her brother's reaction to her baby was a major force in her decision to keep the child:

There was no way I had any idea what a parent was, I had no idea. And so honest to god I had the papers signed and everything. I thought, when I went to the hospital, that I was giving him up. For adoption. They wouldn't let me see him because of that. But my brother came, he's younger than me, and he had seen him, and he said, well you're going to keep him, aren't you? And I just said, yeah I think I am, and he goes, oh, good, and he really felt so glad, and I think he thought it would be more like a brother for him. And then I got to see him, and that's how I made that decision.

Few of the young adult novels I've read about teen parents capture the appreciation and/or regret some of the young mothers I've spoken with express about their decision to keep their children.

Angel seemed to like *A Dance for Three* in part because it retained a violent quality that seemed true to her life. I think she also liked the book because it helped her present her identity to me, an identity that was very much wrapped up in being a teen mom. She liked talking to me about this book because it helped promote that sense of knowledge and authority that becoming a teenage mother had given her.

When I asked her which, of all of the pregnant teens she had read about in our time together, she "identified" with most, she talked about the reality she found in *A Dance for Three*:

In this one—Hannah? Because like in that one I thought everything was going to be perfect with Jack and stuff and then we fought all the time and the first time I told him he was like, are you sure if it was his, just like Milo in that book. He lied about me and said no I never had sex with her. And Milo beat her up. I related to that part, too, because Jack and me have been in quite a bit of fights. Never to the point where I had to go to the hospital but almost! I pressed charges against him but then I dropped them but he had to stay in jail for one day.

When I asked Angel why she had dropped the charges against her boyfriend Jack, she said, "Well, I love him. He doesn't want to be with me. Well, he acts like he wants to be with me but he doesn't act like he wants to be with me?"

The character Hannah in *A Dance for Three*

expresses bewilderment similar—though nowhere near as moving—to the bewilderment Angel expresses here. The character Hannah has many more supports than Angel had, and her violent boyfriend—though he doesn't come to much grief in the novel—is scolded for his bad behavior by the author in ways Angel's boyfriend most likely will never be. One of the pleasures of reading fiction, I suppose, is that we can see people get what they deserve.

## Conclusions

It's a little too simple to say that most of the twenty or so YA novels about teen mothers I've read do not do well at replicating the complexities of the real lives of teen mothers. Most do not, as Nichols says, describe the financial difficulties, the particular problems of parenting, or the difficult choices teen mothers must make, but some of them—like the three I read with three real teen mothers above—do, according to the young mothers I spoke with, capture some aspects of their real lives. Among those aspects are the pleasure and strangeness of a changing body, the sense of condemnation from others, the burden of new responsibility, and the violence of some teen relationships.

Mediated through conversations with a sensitive teacher, each of these novels and others like them can be of use in the classroom. In classes where most of the students are not pregnant or mothering, young adult novels about teen mothers could be used to provide a springboard for discussion of gender expectations and stereotypical representations of teen mothers and their boyfriends. In traditional classrooms conversations about the fact that most of these books were written by women might be fruitful; students might, as Seelinger Trites suggests, attempt feminist readings of some of these novels, discussing ways in which they might be about "female education, female identity formation, female voice, and female choice" (151). Students might begin to talk about whether they believe that women's morality and ideas about relationships are the same as or different from those of men. Boys in a co-ed classroom might be interested in defending themselves against the often flat and negative depictions of boyfriends in young adult novels about teen pregnancy.

When Angel describes learning about labor on

“the pregnancy channel,” instead of from a doctor, midwife or mother, when she describes her boyfriend’s mother videotaping the birth of her son (“but from the side, I didn’t want any crotch shots”), when, with Casey and Brenda, she compares her real life experiences to the experiences of the characters on *CSI* or *Crossing Jordan*, she is providing opportunities a teacher might take up. Though most teachers discuss the impact of new media on their students, surprisingly, none of the YA novels about teen mothers I read with Angel, Casey, and Brenda described media in the lives of the young mother characters. Only *Imani All Mine*—of the twenty young adult novels about teen mothers and pregnant teens I have read—made any mention of media images. Teachers and students might speculate about this lack; why is the world in which these young mothers live described in such simple, conservative terms, and what does that do to a reader’s understanding of the novel’s teen characters? Asking questions like these of YA novels can encourage students to develop a more critical attitude toward all novels they read.

Finally, teachers might also begin after school book clubs, like the one I created, expressly for pregnant and mothering students. In such a book club, through reading some of the texts described here, a teacher might, as Deirdre Kelly suggests, open up a conversation about “the meanings of being a mother, a student, a worker, and a citizen in today’s society. Students could compare the competing images of the good mother . . . and discuss who benefits and who is marginalized by such images” (147). Such a conversation could start, perhaps, with the images of the mothers of the teens in the novels I read here—Hannah’s troubled mother, Verna LaVaughn’s critical mother, and Imani’s preoccupied mother—and move on to the kinds of mothers the teens seem to be themselves. As part of this conversation students could look at the images of school in these novels, ask whether school is idealized in each novel or not; they could ask why mothers are still willing to send their children off to an institution such as school (Grumet qtd. in Pitt, 2006, 101).

I was continually struck by the isolation of the young women with whom I worked. Casey, Angel, and Brenda had children and mothers, boyfriends or husbands, but often times these people were not available to help the young women through the

complicated and new experiences of birthing and raising a baby. The burdens of poverty fell hard upon most of the relatives of these young women, and the amount of time and effort it took relatives to make it through a regular day meant that time for important conversations was often just not there. The support these relatives did provide was complicated—whether by the youth, arrogance, and selfishness of a boyfriend, the preoccupation of a soon-to-be-laid off bartender mother, or the different age of a husband. Reading these young adult novels about teen mothers did provide a kind of “community-through-literature” (Coffel 19) that I hoped it would. The books were important as springboards to conversations; because of the use of these books, with all their flaws, the young women with whom I worked began to feel that that they were not as alone and isolated as they had thought they were; they began to feel that their voices were heard.

*Cynthia Miller Coffel earned her Ph.D. in Language, Literacy, and Culture from the University of Iowa in May 2007. She has taught English in traditional high schools, as well as a school for married, pregnant and mothering teens.*

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# Creating a Space for YAL with LGBT Content in Our Personal Reading:

Creating a *Place* for LGBT Students in Our Classrooms

**A**dolescent literature is a source of both information and validation for today's teenagers. As Adrian Fogelin revealed in her 2006 ALAN address, "Opening Middle School Minds with Young Adult Literature," these texts act as "mirrors" for readers who face challenges like those faced by characters in the texts and as "windows" for readers who don't. Young adult literature (YAL) with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) content is no exception. For teens who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity and for those who are out and proud, YAL with LGBT content can affirm their experiences. For teens who conform to the privileged heterosexual standard and who follow traditional gender expression norms, these texts provide an opportunity to empathize with the LGBT characters whose lives often take very different paths from their own.

According to the 2005 Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey, LGBT students continue to face verbal and physical harassment in schools because of their sexual orientation or gender expression. Of the 1,700 respondents to the 2005 survey, "64.3% reported feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation specifically, and 40.7% felt unsafe because of how they expressed their gender" (Kosciw and Diaz xiii). Clearly, a significant number of LGBT students do not feel

they have a *place* in our schools where they can truly be themselves.

These statistics hit a little closer to home for me when an incident occurred at a school where one of my students was completing student teaching/field experience. After an alleged attack by one student on another, school disciplinary action resulted in a ten-day suspension. Serious injury and hospitalization were involved, along with the implication that the alleged attack was motivated by issues of sexual orientation. The student teacher could not help but include this incident in the required reflections on the daily experience of being in the classroom. The incident was obviously disturbing for this aspiring professional, but we can only imagine how LGBT students at this particular school must have felt.

Even more pervasive than physical violence is the verbal harassment that occurs in schools when students—and teachers—make homophobic remarks such as "faggot" or "dyke" or "that's so gay." Only 16.5% of the respondents to the GLSEN National School Climate Survey claimed that faculty and staff

intervened when they heard such remarks, while over 18% claimed that they had heard teachers themselves use that type of language (Kosciw and Diaz xiii). What are we teaching students when we downplay or ignore acts of hate and prejudice? What are we teaching them when we participate in these acts?

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**What are we teaching students when we downplay or ignore acts of hate and prejudice?**

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As teachers, we must initiate positive changes in our classroom communities regarding differences in sexual orientation and gender expression. For English Language Arts teachers in particular, YAL with LGBT content is one avenue to instigate those changes.

### **In-service and Pre-service Teachers' Perspectives on YAL with LGBT Content**

In order to learn more about pre-service and in-service teachers' perspectives on the value of YAL with LGBT content, I conducted a survey in fall 2007. My participants included 21 pre-service English teachers from Kennesaw State University's undergraduate and masters programs in English Education and 51 middle and high school English teachers in suburban school districts near Atlanta. The survey asked participants to rate the importance of their own awareness and use of YAL with LGBT content in the classroom and provided space for participants to list titles of YAL with LGBT content that they have read, those they (plan to) recommend to students, and those they (plan to) incorporate into their curriculums. Finally, the survey encouraged participants to express their concerns about teaching YAL with LGBT content.

The level of importance participants placed on their own awareness and use of YAL with LGBT content decreased as the stakes grew higher—from being familiar with these texts to actually including them in the curriculum. Over 42% of participants claimed that it is somewhat important for them to be familiar with YAL with LGBT content. Thirty-six

percent claimed that it is somewhat important for them to be able to recommend YAL with LGBT content to students, and just 27% claimed that it is somewhat important for them to incorporate YAL with LGBT content into their curriculum and teaching, with over 56% claiming that teaching YAL with LGBT content is not important at all (See Table 1).

Not surprisingly, the respondents who were most adamantly against the use of YAL with LGBT content were also the ones who were least likely to have read any of those texts themselves. Less than half of the participants (47%) claimed to have read at least one YA novel with LGBT content, with some of the remaining 53% responding with strongly-worded answers, such as this one from a veteran teacher: "Absolutely none! Don't intend to either!!! Our young people are bombarded by this crap in the media and I intend to keep it out of my classroom as long as I teach!!!" Clearly this topic is one for which people feel a moral obligation to state and defend their beliefs vigorously.

Not all of the participants had such a negative opinion about YAL with LGBT content. In fact, 23% expressed their concerns about teaching these texts in a way that I characterized as open-minded and insightful. Two participants expressed no concerns related to the literature itself but instead noted issues of time and respect.

[I have] the same concerns I have with all literature—carving out enough time to do the work justice.

I have no concerns. I feel that discussing things that are

**Table 1.** Teacher attitudes toward YA literature with LGBT content

How important is it for you, as a (pre-service or in-service) teacher, to . . .			
(A) be familiar with YAL with LGBT content?			
(B) be able to recommend YAL with LGBT content to students?			
(C) incorporate YAL with LGBT content into your curriculum and teaching?			
Answer Options	Response Percent for Question A	Response Percent for Question B	Response Percent for Question C
Very important	18.57%	21.74%	8.70%
Somewhat important	42.86%	36.23%	27.54%
Not important	30.00%	37.68%	56.52%
I don't know.	8.57%	4.35%	7.25%

difficult to talk about is part of our responsibility as educators. However, I do feel that before teaching anything with LGBT content as well as racial issues the students and teachers must have a common respect for one another in their classroom community as well as have an understanding of proper “etiquette” when discussing topics such as this. Introducing LGBT content through YAL is a very effective way to lead into discussion.

Other participants noted the importance of YAL with LGBT content for a democratic and culturally responsive classroom.

I believe that young adults would benefit from reading literature that describes many lifestyles, preferences, and character types/situations.

I am aware that to make students more accepting we must increase interaction with things that seem different.

My emphasis in teaching literature is on broadening one’s horizon, so I think teaching literature with LGBT content would be very valuable. I would be very careful with the way I went about it, so I would be concerned with my ability to effectively lead conversations on the subject matter. It is hard enough to teach *Of Mice and Men* and to get the students to respectfully discuss the mentally disabled character, Lennie. It would be a challenge but I think it would be a very valuable challenge.

One participant explained that a lack of listening on the part of administrators, parents, students and other teachers is a concern.

Too often it appears that people are merely waiting for a specific word, a phrase, or an attitude to pounce on without ever taking into consideration the true meaning of what an individual is really trying to say.

These teachers have justifiable concerns, and, judging by the vehement responses from other survey participants, rightfully so. They will most certainly have colleagues challenging them every step of the way in their attempts to ensure that “GLBTQ [gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning] students . . . have the same opportunities as are accorded to heterosexual students to discuss issues important to their identities as GLBTQ people, to learn about GLBTQ people in history, to learn about the GLBTQ community and their struggle for civil rights, and to

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**Too often it appears that people are merely waiting for a specific word, a phrase, or an attitude to pounce on without ever taking into consideration the true meaning of what an individual is really trying to say.**

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go to school without fear of being harassed, tortured, or killed” (MacGillivray 315).

## Misconceptions about YAL with LGBT Content

Although nearly a quarter of the participants’ responses indicated a sense of appreciation of YAL with LGBT content, many others’ responses indicated little tolerance for LGBT people and literature. Perhaps it is teachers’ unfamiliarity with the texts that contributes to their concern and/or negative attitudes. A veteran teacher who had not read any YAL with LGBT content made this remark:

It is not appropriate for literature and composition teachers to discuss sexuality with students. To say otherwise is disgusting and appalling. The idea to make the classroom more “PC” is talking absolute stupidity. If a gay student needs books with this theme, they may speak with the media specialist.

Naturally, teachers who have not read these texts might have misconceptions about their content. The above participant went on to respond to another prompt:

It is not the classroom teacher’s responsibility or purpose to discuss sex with students—heterosexual or homosexual. As far as literature is concerned, themes of love and devotion come up and those themes are approached.

This participant seemed to equate discussions of sex with the inclusion of YAL with LGBT content. The idea that YAL with LGBT content only focuses on the

sexual lives of the characters was a common perception among participants who opposed these texts. Do YA novels that depict heterosexual relationships—either for the young people featured in the book or the adult characters (i.e. parents)—always focus on their sexual lives? Certainly not. The same is true of YAL with LGBT content. For example, Julie Anne Peters’ *Between Mom and Jo* features a male protagonist, Nick, whose lesbian moms separate, forcing him to stay with his birth mom because the law offers no protection to his other mom without proof of adoption.

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**It is not a question of whether or not we want students to think about, talk about, or act on their feelings and uncertainties. They most certainly will. We can either deny our students' physical, cognitive, and emotional development, or we can acknowledge it and prepare ourselves to respond appropriately and compassionately to their needs.**

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Peters' novel *Luna* depicts the experiences of fifteen-year-old Regan who struggles to support her older brother as he transitions from male to female. *Boy Girl Boy* by Ron Koertge depicts the lives of three teenagers on the verge of high school graduation who are trying to come to terms with their identities.

The argument that students shouldn't be making discoveries about their sexuality was also a popular response in this survey. One pre-service teacher, who claimed to have read one YA novel with LGBT content (*Ironman* by Chris Crutcher) expressed this concern:

A YA text exploring LGBT content is essentially a book exploring the sexual lives of

its characters. I don't believe students—especially middle school or early high school—should be making many discoveries about their sexuality (gay or straight); I don't want to think of my students as sexual beings, I guess.

Regardless of whether or not we want students to explore their own sexuality, adolescence is “characterized by a need to establish sexual identity through becoming comfortable with one's own body and sexual feelings” (“Adolescent Development”). In fact, data from the biennial GLSEN National School Climate Surveys, conducted since 1999, reveal that adolescents as young as twelve years old are identifying themselves as LGBT (“FAQs”). It is not a question of whether or not we want students to think about, talk about, or act on their feelings and uncertainties. They most certainly will. We can either deny our students' physical, cognitive, and emotional development, or we can acknowledge it and prepare ourselves to respond appropriately and compassionately to their needs.

## Can Students Handle It?

Twenty-seven percent of the participants expressed concerns about student maturity and reactions to YAL with LGBT content.

While I can certainly see the value of suggesting young adult literature with LGBT content to students on a list of possible choices, I doubt I would ever include a selection for the entire class to read. I prefer to stick with the universal themes found in the classics. If selected, introduced, discussed, and taught well, students still love the classics. When I have used essays or magazine articles that include LGBT, they often make many students unnecessarily uncomfortable.

With the student populations I've seen, any reference to homosexuality has the potential to turn ugly, which would be difficult to avoid without seeming to promote one lifestyle or the other.

I imagine most adolescents are not exactly ready to discuss and confront LGBT content on a mature level.

Are adolescents capable of discussing LGBT content on a mature level? Well, they are certainly capable of confronting LGBT content on an *immature* level, judging by the insults and harassment that occur regularly in public schools. Might we consider helping them to address it with more care and respect? Is that not part of our role as teachers—asking students to consider alternative viewpoints *thoughtfully*, encouraging them to think critically about their own assumptions, discussing and modeling for them how to listen carefully and disagree respectfully?

## What Values Should Schools and Teachers Teach?

Several participants expressed concern about how they would be perceived as teachers for including YAL with LGBT content in their curriculums. A veteran teacher who claimed to see no importance in being familiar with or sharing these texts with her students had this to say:

I absolutely feel that a student's sexual orientation is clearly none of my business as a classroom teacher, and I feel that making decisions based on this aspect of the literature is tantamount to bringing one's personal political agenda into the classroom. I consider that unethical.

This participant's response reveals another common rationale for avoiding texts with LGBT content—that

teachers should not be made aware of their students' sexual orientations. Yet, how many of us simply assume that our students are heterosexual? It's an easy assumption to make because we've not challenged ourselves to do otherwise. We live in a society in which heterosexuality and traditional gender roles are assumed, and we demonstrate these assumptions in our interactions with our students and in the texts we share with them. A 2004 national poll conducted by GLSEN revealed that "approximately 5% of American high school students identify as lesbian or gay," which averages out to at least one student per classroom ("FAQs"). Clearly, our assumptions need to change.

This participant also equates the "bringing [of] one's personal political agenda into the classroom" with the teaching of YAL with LGBT content. This begs the question: to use this participant's logic, isn't the absence of texts with LGBT content and the inclusion of texts that only represent heterosexual relationships and traditional gender norms simply another way to bring our political agendas to the classroom? Aren't our political agendas pretty evident based on the content we choose to include in our curriculum design?

According to MacGillivray, it is impossible for educators to avoid teaching values since "[t]hey do so even by default, because they reinforce the status quo" (316). By avoiding the subject, teachers indirectly impose a set of values that ignore, devalue, and silence LGBT students. Imagine what it must feel like for a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning student to see only heterosexual relationships represented in classroom texts and discussions. Imagine, too, what it must feel like for a student who is questioning his/her gender identity to see only traditional gender roles/expressions represented in those same texts and discussions. Regardless of our political agendas and personal beliefs we have an obligation to our students as we prepare them to be democratic citizens who are capable of valuing one another as such, not people who judge one another based on any number of uncontrollable qualities.

It is also important to note that "simply discuss[ing] different sexual orientations and gender identities in a classroom does not imply that a teacher must teach one over another or approve more highly of one over another" (MacGillivray 317). Indeed, incorporating YAL with LGBT content into our curricu-

lums does not indicate that we are trying "to force one's views upon children in their formative years," as one participant put it. Rather, it demonstrates to our students that these texts—these people, our *students*—are valued.

## Can Parents and Administrators Handle It?

By far the most pressing issue for in-service and pre-service teachers in relation to teaching YAL with LGBT content was the reaction of parents and administrators. Forty-seven percent claimed that parents and administrators were a concern. Some teachers recalled negative experiences when members of these groups became critical of their text selections.

Once I did *The Color Purple* with my Honors 10th grade, and there was a lot of misunderstanding. Later the book was put behind locks in the library, and now the seniors can choose it for independent reading but have to have parental consent. That's how conservative we are here.

I don't think the sexual orientation of anyone else is my business, and I work in a very conservative county. I'd have a hundred parents lined up outside the principal's office. I got called in several years ago for reading *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* by Chris Crutcher.

Teachers who are concerned about administrative and parental reactions would do well to investigate district and school policies pertaining to sexual orientation and gender identity/expression:

- Does the school have non-discrimination and sexual harassment policies in place that explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identity/expression?
- Does the school provide resources and training for faculty, staff, and students about sexual orientation and gender identity/expression and to combat anti-LGBT bullying and harassment?

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- Does the state have legislation that supports these initiatives? (“PFLAG”)

Regardless of the answers to these questions, however, teachers can and should increase their own awareness of the LGBT community by reading texts that feature LGBT characters and content. This includes YAL.

## Creating Space for YAL with LGBT Content in our Personal Libraries

These in-service and pre-service teachers have the same concerns that I did when I taught middle school. They have the same concerns I have now, as I prepare future English teachers to negotiate the complexities of planning for and managing their own English Language Arts classrooms. In my university classroom, I have a great deal more freedom to encourage discussion about the need for teachers to include a range of texts in the curriculum, but if I were to return to the secondary classroom, I would still face these obstacles. My writing of this piece is an attempt to begin articulating these concerns and developing a plan of action for myself and for my audience.

Maybe one purpose of YAL with LGBT content is to educate teachers: to help us empathize with students (and colleagues) who may be questioning their own sexual orientation or gender identity; to help us become informed, comfortable, responsible, and courageous in our responses to homophobic and gender stereotypic comments and slurs; to help us create a classroom and school environment in which students feel they have a sense of place and where they can express themselves fully. Perhaps, this is the first step for us: simply reading the texts ourselves. Particularly for teachers who feel that their hands are tied by administrative and parental restrictions, maybe the first step is to simply make ourselves more aware of the quality adolescent literature available that features LGBT characters.

Last semester I participated in a book club for a text called *Inspiration for LGBT Students & Their Allies*. This text contains essays, poems, and drawings by LGBT students and their advocates. For the first time in my life I began thinking about what it means for someone to question his/her gender identity and to express his/her gender differently from the traditional means of doing so. I began to think about the importance of addressing not just sexual orientation in our

curriculums, but also gender identity/expression as we try to help all students feel safe and affirmed in our classrooms, schools, and society. This has led me to YA texts like *Luna* by Julie Anne Peters, *What Happened to Lani Garver* by Carol Plum-Ucci, *Parrotfish* by Ellen Wittlinger, and “The Wrong Body” by Claiborne Smith. It has also led me to non-fiction texts such as *Transparent: Love, Family, and Living the T with Transgender Teenagers* by Cris Beam, which chronicles the lives of four male-to-female transgender teens in Los Angeles.

As a middle school teacher, I recall having frank discussions with my students about the need to respect people’s sexual orientation and refrain from using the “that’s so gay” slur, but I don’t ever recall discussing gender identity and gender expression with them. Somehow, that part of the LGBT acronym was off my radar. I didn’t even know what *transgender* meant, let alone how to reflect on my own words and actions to try to make sure that I was not referring exclusively to traditional gender roles in my instruction and in my informal interactions with students.

The only text we read that had any type of LGBT content was *If You Come Softly* by Jacqueline Woodson, which features a protagonist whose sister is a lesbian. The homosexuality is not the issue or problem in the story; the two protagonists’ interracial relationship is. But I distinctly remember my students tittering uncomfortably at the mention of a lesbian relationship. I recall that we didn’t spend much—if any—time talking about it; I wanted to wait for student questions, and none came, so it just became the elephant in the room that nobody mentioned—including me. I let Woodson do the talking for us. Why? Because I had the same concerns that my survey participants have: I didn’t have the confidence or knowledge to facilitate a discussion about LGBT issues, and I didn’t know how to respond to negative responses from students, parents, colleagues, and administrators.

I still don’t know exactly how to address these concerns except that avoiding them by excluding LGBT content from the curriculum is no longer an option. The fact is, some of our students will question their gender identities. They will question their sexual orientations. Whether or not they confide in us is another story. But shouldn’t we be concerned about making sure that our classrooms aren’t just safe

spaces for the students who conform to the traditional gender and sexual roles? Should we not educate ourselves and, in turn, educate our students about the importance of respecting and appreciating our differences, rather than using them as weapons to hurt, humiliate, and exclude—either intentionally or unintentionally?

MacGillivray argues that the inclusion of LGBT content in the curriculum “can help to destigmatize nonheterosexual identities and can deconstruct gender role stereotypes that limit all students” (305). This content doesn’t just benefit our LGBT students, it benefits all of our students since “[t]he fear of being perceived as gay restricts boys to making choices that will affirm what it means to be a man in our society and restricts girls to making choices that will affirm what it means to be a woman” (MacGillivray 305). By not including texts with LGBT content in our curriculums, or at the very least in our personal or classroom libraries, we risk reinforcing gender role stereotypes and a culture of heteronormativity, which ultimately excludes LGBT teens from the community of learners who feel valued and whose values are reflected in our classrooms and schools.

## Recommended Reading: YAL with LGBT Content

While I’m certainly not an expert, below I have shared some texts that I’ve read, enjoyed, and learned from. If you’ve not done so already, consider reading these recent YA texts with LGBT content in order to better equip yourself to be a more reflective, compassionate, and knowledgeable teacher. If you’ve already read them, take a look at young adult author Lee Wind’s blog at <http://www.leewind.org/>. In it, Wind attempts to create “as inclusive and thorough a resource as possible for finding out about all the YA books out there with GLBTQ characters and themes!” (Wind). His blog could also be an excellent resource for your students and your media specialist.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> “Transgender is an umbrella term—used to catch anybody who looks or acts outside the bounds of traditional gender norms” (Beam 15).

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## Minding the Cover Story:

Boys, Workshop, and Real Reading

**R**ecent studies show that the reading abilities of adolescents are in crisis. The ACT reports that only 51% of high school students who took the test in 2005 are prepared for college-level reading, which requires students to comprehend, make supported inferences from, and analyze complex texts (ACT 1,16). Other studies show that adolescents experience a sharp decline in their desire to read beginning in middle and high school (Snow and Biancarosa 6; AFT 25). Equally, females consistently outperform males in the areas of reading and writing (ACT 7). This information is generally alarming, but, for some teachers, it is not surprising. Nancie Atwell writes that the demands of high stakes testing and standards movements have pushed many teachers to abandon practices that support critical lifelong readers, regardless of gender (107). Instead, the pressures to teach, reinforce, and assess state and local standards crowd English and content area curricula (ACT 9). Ironically, a 2004 report from Carnegie Corporation of New York found that adolescent reading abilities increase when teachers allow students to self-select from a variety of high-level texts, incorporate collaborative text-based discussions, and individualize reading instruction by modeling multiple strategies for dissecting complicated texts (Biancarosa and Snow 26-27). In fact, students exposed to these practices in a third- through sixth-grade reading program did exceptionally better on standardized reading tests than those engaged in remedial reading instruction and test preparation for the same time period (Reis et. al. 16-19).

In 2002, Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm

presented research on a specific group of boys and this adolescent literacy debacle. Although they acknowledged the crisis across genders, their study specifically focused on the marked declines in male adolescent literacy (1-2). Among their participants (who spanned multiple ethnicities and social contexts), they found a group of boys whose absorption in video gaming imitated a “flow” experience: the games offered the boys opportunities to feel competent and challenge themselves, but still provided clear goals and consistent, focused feedback (51). Smith and Wilhelm further investigate how similar classroom environments or reading experiences can potentially establish “flow” patterns for students (52). Self-selection, teacher and peer conferences, and aesthetic classroom reading experiences are the foundations of for the reading workshop. Such classrooms also provide opportunities for students to use their selections as gateways to other, more complex, pieces of literature, and engage in collaborative work that exposes the personal or global implications of whole texts (Atwell 12-16). Clearly, the reading workshop incorporates what research tells us are best practices for adolescent literacy; in addition, it is potentially a “flow” environment for specific students (Biancarosa and Snow 24-27; Smith and Wilhelm 109, 147, 198). Likewise, these classroom environments encourage frequent and lifelong readers who often do better on the tests (ACT 27; Atwell 107; Reis et al. 17; Snow and Biancarosa 2). Nevertheless, because all students must first *want* to read before they become lifelong readers, teachers in these classrooms work tirelessly to scaffold the path of independent reading. Through extensive libraries,

suggestion lists, and coaching, they strive to continue the reading conversation with both male and female students.

Building classroom libraries or suggestion lists that clearly reflect the reading possibilities of our individual students is no easy task. In order to do this successfully, we must constantly engage in conversations with them about their personal and reading interests (Atwell 31; Smith and Wilhelm 20). Equally, we have to listen when they talk to their peers about reading, even if those conversations are about texts we do not consider a part of the literature classroom. When we authentically investigate the literate lives of our students, we can better inform our classroom libraries and coaching skills. Nevertheless, there are always those reading dialogues that challenge our knowledge and experience as teachers. As evidenced by the surge of research, teacher anecdotes, library, and schoolwide initiatives, it would appear that boys are less likely than girls to read fluently and voluminously (Smith and Wilhelm xix-xx; Kenney 1). For teachers, this often makes knowing and understanding the reading interests of boys a cumbersome process; yet, we cannot abandon such classroom conversations, even when some students consistently tell us that they do not read. In hopes of coming to a critical understanding about the literate lives of our male students, teachers are often called to consider the gender role stereotypes adolescent boys experience (Smith and Wilhelm 14-16). Max, one of Sally's former students, pushed her to understand how to continue such reading conversations, even at an impasse.

Max entered Sally's tenth-grade reading workshop classroom as an avid reader; he had experienced the workshop model for years, confidently made his own literature selections, and took risks at the suggestion of peers and teachers. So, when he arrived one morning looking slightly broken, Sally was stunned to find out that it was the result of reading. After showing her his new choices for reading workshop, he quickly put them back into his bag. He then asked Sally if she thought he liked "girly" books. Apparently, when he had gone excitedly to buy his choice titles for reading workshop, the cashier at the bookstore looked at the covers and suggested that his English teacher was making him read "girl" books. Max was crushed. He didn't dare acknowledge that he had chosen the

books for himself; instead, he informed Sally that he would not read his new choices. Even after all the work the school had done to coach confident, lifelong readers who made independent choices about texts, someone had still made a stereotypical reading decision for Max. He asked Sally to suggest some "boy" books. Suddenly, independent Max had become dependent on his female teacher to steer him toward the "masculine" side of reading.

As teachers, we want our students to believe that there are truly no "boy" and "girl" books. In a perfect reading workshop, boys and girls are free to blur these lines by exercising their own independent reading interests. We would like to believe that the classroom communities we create for students nurture their choices, regardless of the title, cover, or amount of glitter. Nevertheless, we know that the real world of reading is not so kind. Boys and girls receive different, but equally perplexing, gender messages from our society. These messages often spill over into their public reading lives and impact their confidence in choosing their own texts or simply reading at all. Without conversation, however, Sally would never have understood why Max had abandoned his reading independence for the sake of perceived masculinity. Because she respected his decision as a fellow reader, she did not argue with his thoughts about abandoning the books. Instead, it was more important to bring Max back to independent reading. When she reflected on his new experience and former reading patterns, however, she realized the importance of the cover story.

Max's reading patterns, interests, and dialogues

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about books showed similarities to other male students in Sally's class. These students often self-selected what they called real fiction. For them, real fiction mirrored their realities as teenage boys. Their reading patterns showed disinterest in stories about

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**These students often self-selected what they called real fiction. For them, real fiction mirrored their realities as teenage boys. Their reading patterns showed disinterest in stories about boys who became the star athlete and won the high school trophy or men who solved the code to save the world.**

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boys who became the star athlete and won the high school trophy or men who solved the code to save the world. Although the above books might have proven themselves to be more cover-friendly to the outside world, these students enjoyed books that affirmed them as the boys they were, not the ones they should have been. In such books, male characters were not violent or rebellious teens who fought with their parents. They didn't have any monumental problems like abuse, addictions, or alcoholic relatives; nobody got pregnant in them, and, usually, nobody even died. Essentially, these particular boys liked books void of the *do something, save*

*someone, win something* message that many of Sally's male students received from adult and peer communities. In addition, even though this group of boys understood the critical implications of choosing books based on covers, this understanding did not translate into reading with abandon.

There are several male young adult novelists who write books that appeal to readers like Max. These books are wonderful ways to entice or reinforce readers whose interests lie in real fiction. In title and appearance, they are low-risk books for such male readers, but prove to be profound for male and female readers alike. In addition, their use of complex storytelling devices and multiple themes that extend realistically beyond the scope of a novel are excellent ways to nudge students toward higher-level analysis. Likewise, they are seamless transition points for

students whose reading histories involve non-fiction, biographies, or memoirs. They debunk gender stereotypes by providing us with authentic male characters that ultimately learn to embrace the humorous and unpredictable worlds they inhabit. These characters confront the *do something, win something, take care of someone* demands of society and inadvertently discover the everyday heroes within themselves. They are reminders that when we open our eyes and truly engage in our social, human experience, we become vulnerable to failure, but also champions of our own individual gifts. Ultimately, we know that these personal realizations profoundly outweigh winning the high school football trophy. They help students like Max find a sense of place and self in Young Adult Literature by accepting and celebrating who they already are as boys. Not surprisingly, some of these texts are clear reflections of the pressures male students experience in our society, schools, and classrooms.

Colin Singleton, the main character of John Green's 2006 novel *An Abundance of Katherines*, expresses his greatest fear in this way: "What if this is it? What if ten years from now I'm sitting in a fugging cubicle crunching numbers and memorizing baseball statistics [. . .] and I never do anything significant and I'm just a complete waste?" (9). Colin, like so many of our students, believes two myths perpetuated by modern society concerning a boy's transition from adolescent to man: one, that success in the workplace is not dependent on a man's sense of fulfillment of his passion, but on his ability to provide monetary security for himself and his family; and two, that employment, in addition to the hypothetical wife and 2.5 children, will not be enough to lift a man from the ranks of the average to become a significant member of society. Rather, young men are pressured to make a contribution to society – one that can be measured in a tangible, socially identifiable way.

For Colin, social obscurity is especially dangerous; he is an achiever. Once a noted child prodigy, skilled and adept at math and various foreign languages, Colin's childhood was a succession of adults and playmates amazed and wonder-struck by his proficiency. But now, at the end of his high school career, Colin's intellectual superiority has tapered off; his gifts have evened out until Colin is only *slightly* better at math and foreign languages than his peers. With this

sudden shift of his role in life, from savant to teenager, Colin sinks into a depression. He recognizes that now no one will notice, nor pay special attention, to him. His relationship problems are the same ones facing every other boy he knows. After four years, he has graduated, and college lies ahead. Colin is doing exactly what he is supposed to do. Still, he is unsettled. No one, teachers and parents included, shares Colin's concern or worry that he has become his own worst nightmare: average.

Hassan, Colin's best friend, has decided to take a year off after graduating high school. Thus far, he has spent the majority of his days watching television's *Judge Judy*. Hassan's parents have all but given up on earlier hopes of their son becoming an important member of society. His father finally concedes, "If you call me in a week and have a job, you can stay wherever you want as long as you want, as far as I'm concerned" (14). The resignation Hassan's father expresses should not be read as disappointment in his son's choices. Rather, because they love him, Hassan's parents recognize the stigma attached to any boy in the process of becoming a man, who is seen to lack the socially expected impulses toward ambition and drive.

Ultimately, Hassan and Colin, who are both urban teenagers, realize their gifts in the rural town of Gutshot, Tennessee. In Gutshot, they finally find a sense of self far away from their Chicago homes. Removed from the pressures that had previously dominated their lives, Colin and Hassan discover an "always-coming infinite future stretching out before [them]" (215). Hassan decides to attend college, but not as an act of defeat. Instead, by deciding in his own time that he is ready, he gains control of his life. Colin, who struggled to retain the qualities he felt made him unique, sees that "there [is] room enough to be anyone – anyone except who he'd already been [. . .] you can't stop the future from coming" (214). Through the relationships they cultivate with both the youth and elders of the town, Colin and Hassan find beauty in the gray area that exists between child prodigy and couch potato extremes. They both come to understand that individual satisfaction determines success. Nevertheless, such discoveries are not without personal risks and cautious surrender to the unpredictable qualities of human relationships.

Similarly, fifteen-year-old Craig Gilner of Ned

Vizzini's *It's Kind of a Funny Story* finds self-satisfaction in a very unlikely place. Just as Hassan is initially content to do nothing, Craig Gilner accepts he will never do enough to succeed. From the earliest pages of Vizzini's novel, Craig realizes he is in over his head. Though he's been accepted to the Executive Pre-Professional High School in Manhattan, Craig knows he nearly ran himself ragged studying and cramming; it's a lifestyle he will not be able to maintain. Yet, the pressure weighing down on Craig is relentless, so he begins to smoke pot and throw up what little food he eats. His downward spiral culminates with a call to a suicide hotline, and Craig's hospitalization in an adult psychiatric ward. Here, he realizes the consequences of his actions.

Extreme? Of course. Realistic? Sadly, yes. Every day, students are reinforced with the notion that if they are not the class leaders, they are somehow lacking or less important. School bulletins commend student athletes on their achievements; students are trained to join as many extra-curricular clubs as possible, not to cultivate their interests or give back to the community, but because clubs look great on college applications. The valedictorians, prom queen and kings, and students awarded for service projects all represent the high school, yet, in actuality, these students are the minority. Classes are full of young, male students who do their homework, attend and participate in class, but never step to the forefront. Inadvertently, these boys, while not being punished for getting by, are not particularly noticed either.

In this culture, students like Craig can decide to push themselves beyond their limits in order to gain recognition and attention. In the end, however, Craig's health is at risk. Oddly, his motivations are almost entirely unselfish. He is not attending the high school for him, but for his parents. Craig, like many young men, feels a duty to fulfill his role in society as it has been presented to him throughout the whole of

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his education. While not the stereotypically pushy parents, Craig's mother and father stress the importance of a good education. Perhaps because they have seen the part of the world that values and judges young men and women on the basis of schooling, they want their son to succeed in his educational life. With one eye to his adult future, and the other eye to the teenage experience that he is missing, it is no wonder, then, when Craig stumbles and falls.

Once again, it is in this unlikely place that Craig finds his way back to himself. Surrounded by adult mental patients, Craig begins to realize the diverse faces of mental illness and chronic depression. Yet, he is also thrust into a space where, because the patients are so authentic, he cannot avoid realizing their needs.

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**As the novel progresses, Craig struggles, but shifts into a hopeful character who does not judge himself by the outside world's prescription.**

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In one instance, a fellow patient (Bobby) needs a dress shirt for a housing interview. Without thinking, Craig offers him one of his. Upon finding out that Bobby passed the interview, Craig realizes the impact of such a seemingly small gesture. "I stand up and Bobby hugs me [. . .] I think about how much this means to this guy, about how much more important

it is than going to any high school or getting with any girl or being friends with anybody. This guy just got a place to *live*" (317). As the novel progresses, Craig struggles, but shifts into a hopeful character who does not judge himself by the outside world's prescription. Instead, he ultimately sees his own personal gifts as "Anchors" (391-392). Oddly at home in the psychiatric ward where no one is graded and no competition exists for the most prestigious padded cell, Craig sees his decision to almost kill himself was perhaps the greatest mistake he's made. "Travel. Fly. Swim. Meet. Love [. . .] Take these verbs and enjoy them [. . .] You could have left them all behind but you chose to stay here. So live for real now, Craig. Live. Live. Live. Live" (444). At last, his happiness comes from his own self-realization and understanding that, for him, life will be more fulfilling when he bucks the status quo in order to simply live.

Ed Kennedy, from Markus Zusak's *I Am the*

*Messenger*, can't help but feel like a loser. He explains: "Constantly, I'm asking myself, *Well, Ed—what have you really achieved in your nineteen years?*" (16). Ed works as a cabbie, is hopelessly in love with an amazing girl, and is unmotivated. Living his normal existence, Ed inadvertently thwarts a robbery at a bank, and becomes an unwilling hero. A series of messages appear on playing cards, with cryptic instructions and names for Ed to investigate. Suddenly, Ed has what society has always told him he needed: a purpose. His journey in the novel is both beautiful and honest. He becomes privy to the daily struggles and celebrates the small accomplishments of strangers. In this, he inadvertently becomes connected to them and, in turn, shares their pleasures and pain. Each one of these characters comes to know him, and their mutual stories mirror the vulnerability of human life. Ed encounters people he would never have picked up in his cab, and he sees acts of kindness and hatred that shatter his assumptions about the small world he's occupied for the majority of his life. Yet, his endeavors are not comparable, at least according to society, to Ed's original act of heroism in the bank. Regardless of the impact Ed has had on so many people, he is still considered to be a nobody working a nothing job, going nowhere fast.

In the end, however, Ed is no less a hero because he works as a cabbie and did not go to college. Instead, he is all that we hope our real-life heroes will be: honest, gentle, slightly unsure of himself, but armed with the empathetic insights that are a product of his journey into the worlds of random strangers and friends. Ed Kennedy realizes that, although he did not meet the expectations of his society, his journey brought him back to himself. He reflects on the small, seemingly insignificant, things he has accomplished along the way and embraces their personal significance and purpose. Through this, he ventures to believe that maybe, possibly, "everyone can live beyond what they are capable of" (Zusak 357). His small world is more profound than he imagined.

Similar to Colin, Hassan, Craig, and Ed, our students will also look to the outside world for validation. Often books chart journeys of characters from small towns to larger, where all it takes is one act of astonishing courage, or a display of masculine power, to gain validation. Other novels feature male characters fighting in wars and playing in that one,

make-or-break football, basketball, or baseball game. The message these novels send to young men is the importance of one moment or one victory. A single incident can define a life. A wrong choice, as much as a right, can mean the difference between a happy future and many years of regretful obscurity. A personal accomplishment or a small, interior struggle finally won can be deemed insubstantial if it is not recognized by society; the value drops away if it fails to align with the established norms. Contrarily, Smith and Wilhelm write that the boys in their study liked certain texts because they made them feel like insiders on an unconventional journey, but also challenged them to see their lives differently (155-156). Green, Vizzini, and Zusak invite us on such journeys where there are, in fact, other options for boys. Among the diversity of texts in our classrooms, we can offer those where male characters disprove the notion that only exterior forces determine happiness. When we do this, we remind students of what Ed Kennedy repeats in the end of Zusak's novel: "I'm not the messenger at all/ I'm the message" (357). Indeed, our students, with their whole dream-filled lives ahead of them, truly are the message.

Nevertheless, the current reality of the English classroom often upstages these characters and journeys. Although research shows that there are best practices for adolescent literacy, the demands of high stakes testing often overshadow them. Because of this, for some it might appear frivolous to set up reading workshop classrooms at the secondary level when students need to be learning the standards by practicing reading comprehension, analysis, and fluency. Research, however, tells us that the more students read independently and have access to varied texts, the better they often do on the tests (Atwell 107). Setting up a reading workshop classroom allows teachers to create an environment that nurtures lifelong readers who know how to independently select texts and read for pleasure. In such a classroom, peer and teacher dialogue challenges students to expand their repertoires into more diverse and complicated texts. Reading fluency, comprehension, and analysis all improve when students read more. Likewise, when students have the right to choose their own texts and read independently during class, they are more likely to become personally invested in reading. This is also a best practice for male students

(Smith and Wilhelm 196-198). In order to help students find a sense of place and self in literature, we need classroom environments that nurture independent reading. Equally, we have to embrace the idea that such practices *do* teach the standards. When we allow research to inform our practices, we find that we are doing what is in the best interests of all our students.

Likewise, a well-tuned reading workshop is never void of critical talk about books. Our classrooms are full of diverse readers and the books that we love are often not the same ones they choose; yet, students often look to us for guidance in their choices. Our relationships with them as fellow readers must respect and acknowledge their experiences as private and public human beings. Such understandings lead us, as teachers, into reading territories that we might not otherwise explore. They call us to reflect on our understanding of the adolescents in our classrooms and the ways literature can reinforce or reject the gender roles or status quo around them. Thus, our libraries and suggestion lists constantly evolve to reflect new students and new literature. In such environments, conversations about literature are equally diverse and, hopefully, offer critical opportunities for texts to inform students' lives, whether they read to find out that they aren't alone or to escape into solitude where anything is possible.

Our workshop dialogues might lead us to suggest texts that mind the cover story, but are also rich with characters that ultimately reject it. Through characters like Colin, Hassan, Craig, and Ed, we realize the implications of our own, individual, cover stories. Such novels reflect societies where the stakes are high for adolescent boys to demonstrate success to the outside world and each story poignantly articulates these experiences through a male main character. For teachers, these male characters are reflections of the countless boys who have entered and exited our

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**Research, however, tells us that the more students read independently and have access to varied texts, the better they often do on the tests (Atwell 107).**

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classrooms. These boys, for the most part, do their work, have friends, love their families, but are still, for whatever reason, unsettled. Each book provides us with a glimpse of what it means to be unsettled for some teenaged boys and, ultimately, the profundity of finally learning to settle oneself. They remind us that, no matter how many messages we send students about controlling their destinies through good grades, test scores, and social accomplishments, life is still very funny and unpredictable. Workshop experiences provide our students with opportunities for personal and intellectual growth, but such stories give our male students the unassuming possibility that has been kept hidden from them for too long: “Keep living [. . .]. . . . It’s only the pages that stop here” (Zusak 354).

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# Teaching Memoir in English Class:

## Taking Students to *Jesus Land*

“It’s taken me twenty years to grasp the truth of what happened in *Jesus Land*”

—Julia Scheeres (354)

Once in a great while—if you are lucky—a book comes along that stops you in your tracks, makes you turn around, question what you thought to be true, confirms your worst doubts, gives you immeasurable hope, and makes you a better person because of reading it. The first book to affect me in that way was *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The second was *Jesus Land* by Julia Scheeres, the winner of a 2006 Alex Award from the American Library Association (ALA).

Each year the Alex Award is given to ten books written for adults—published the year prior—that have special appeal to young adults, ages 12 through 18. Winning books must be written in a genre that

especially appeals to young adults, potentially appealing to teenagers, and well written and very readable. Scheeres’ memoir duly fits each of these principles.

In this article, five of my students at the University of Alabama and I make a case for teaching *Jesus Land* in high school English classes, despite its

inherently controversial and troubling religious and racial themes. Beginning with an overview of the book, we continue with the genre of memoir and why this particular title is important for students to read and study. Quotations are used from my students’ papers and written reflections from class; these appear credited to them by name (Isabel Arteta, Chad McGartlin, Kristen Stults, Elizabeth Welsh, and Charles White). From there, we provide an analysis of and justify teaching Scheeres’ work according to criteria set by Carol Jago (2004), Ted Hipple (nd), and Kenneth Donelson and Alleen Nilsen (2005). I conclude with my own personal reactions to Julia and her book.

### What Is *Jesus Land* About?

I came across *Jesus Land* by accident. While browsing the bookstore for a young adult novel, a book cover photograph totally captivated me: a young white girl and black boy in 1970s attire seemingly attending a school function (see Figure 1). This was no staged photo; this was real. What story was that one photo telling? Who were these two youngsters and how did they relate to Jesus? After looking at the back cover, I had to read it. And, read it I did—in nearly one sitting, staying up half the night to finish it.

Scheeres’ memoir is not so much *her* story as the story of her relationship with her adopted brother, David, growing up in a strict, religious household. As

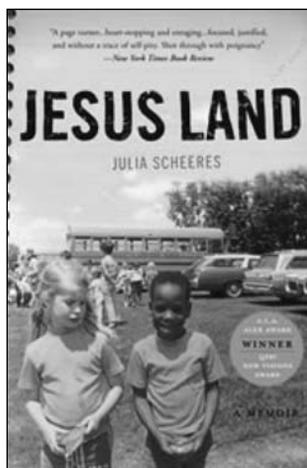


Figure 1. *Jesus Land* cover

she states on her website (<http://www.juliascheeres.com/>),

*Jesus Land* is about my close relationship with my adopted brother David. It covers our Calvinist upbringing in Indiana and our stint at a Christian reform school in the Dominican Republic as teens. David, an African American, was adopted by my family in 1970, when he was 3. We were the same age. The book begins with our move to rural Indiana and our transition from a tiny Christian school to a large, public school where David and my other adopted black brother were the only minority students. It ends with David and me on a beach in the Dominican Republic. It's a pretty wild ride between these two events. The central theme of *Jesus Land* is how race and religion tested our relationship. It's a book about a couple of misfit kids learning to survive in a hostile environment, and the transcendence of sibling love.

### **The (Instructional) Promises and Perils of *Jesus Land***

Milner and Milner (2003) claim that autobiographies—the genre of which memoirs belong—“take us into the lives of others but at closer, more intimate range,” making us “eyewitnesses to actual events” (252). Milner and Milner assert that such works often catch adolescents’ natural interest about the lives of others. Specifically, memoirs differ from autobiographies in that “unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing

significant, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it. The writer of a memoir takes us back to a corner of his or her life that was unusually vivid or intense” (Zinsser, 1987, 13, cited in Milner & Milner, 2003). In *Jesus Land*, Julia takes readers on a present-tense journey through her turbulent teenage years, a time which still profoundly affects her.

As English teachers, we have relatively few problems deliberating about fictional religious and racial issues: Hester’s scarlet A, Atticus’ defense of Tom Robinson, or Jerry Renault’s refusal to sell chocolates. What will hook readers in *Jesus Land*, no matter how close to or far removed from Scheeres’

upbringing, is, ironically, their connection to issues of race and religion seen and experienced by Julia and David. Growing up in America, children and adolescents confront and are confronted by race and religion on a daily basis. In fact, the complexity of the two real-life issues sometimes renders students (and teachers) silent.

Donelson and Nilsen (2005) note that “books that abashedly explore religious themes are relatively rare, partly because schools and libraries fear mixing church and state . . . it has been easier for schools to include religious books with historical settings” (132). Yet, they also stress that young adult literature does not exist in a vacuum. In these highly politicized times, students are mindful of what they see, read, and hear at home, on the news, from their peers, and on television and the Internet. Though a memoir, *Jesus Land* reads like a fiction novel with themes that would resonate with teen readers: a love story, survival, coming of age, family relationships, and abuse, to name a few. Such themes are found in the traditional and contemporary works currently read, discussed, and analyzed in English classes. As Kristin Stults states:

Many non-fiction books and memoirs address the issue of racism, but Scheeres’ memoir is unique in that it offers an up close glimpse of what racism was like as seen from the eyes of a white girl growing up with two black brothers. We get her unique perspective on experiencing the racism so closely, but also being separated from it because of her whiteness. This separation occurs even in her own household, where her brothers are routinely abused by their father, presumably because they are black, and Julia is spared even though she commits the same “sins.” In addition, the book deals with Christian fundamentalism. There are many memoirs where people have been scarred by their religious upbringings, but Julia’s is unique in that her parents were so full of zeal for their own church and for foreign missionaries, but utterly lacking in love for their own children. Her story is also different in that her parents went so far as to send her and her brother to a Christian reform school in the Dominican Republic. There, we get another perspective on the abuses committed in the name of Christianity.

Students and teachers can pay close attention to the way Scheeres is able to tell such a heart wrenching story while still maintaining her humor and even detachment from the situations at times. Students should study how she does this, and if it makes her story more or less effective. The way she uses a humorous and somewhat sarcastic tone at times makes the passages that are truly sentimental and heartfelt, that much more powerful.

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**In these highly politicized times, students are mindful of what they see, read, and hear at home, on the news, from their peers, and on television and the Internet.**

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Charles White and Chad McGartlin agree, adding that “readers can easily identify with such an explicitly true and real character as she deals with issues in a very internal manner . . . themes such as racism, religion and maturation in adolescence are consistently and smoothly woven throughout the book in a very eloquent manner as opposed to brief and superficial attempts at highlighting them as many books seem to do.”

Beyond typical classroom strategies such as literature circles and discussion questions, *Jesus Land* and Scheeres’ accessibility lends itself to deeper reader response activities. Charles and Chad offer several good ideas in Figure 2. Notwithstanding the promising classroom instruction that could take place with this book, the very issues that make it so valuable are also those which might give some teachers, administrators, and parents concern. Patty Campbell (1994)

#### READER RESPONSE 1

Read the following information from the Escuela Caribe brochure. After reading the chapters that detail their experiences at the school, create a brochure of your own, using an ironic tone, advertising the schools’ negative aspects.

Do you have an adolescent who . . .

- Rejects your family’s Christian values?
  - Is out of control? Has a poor self-image?
  - Is irresponsible, showing lack of character?
  - Runs with a negative crowd or has no friends?
  - Is unmotivated and failing in school?
  - Is disrespectful, rejecting your love and others?
- New Horizons Youth Ministries can help.

#### **Concept**

Why in the Dominican Republic? Three reasons: atmosphere, culture shock, and distance.

#### **Atmosphere**

Escuela Caribe is set far away from the pervasive influences of American society: the materialism, the social ills, the negative peers, and the struggles in one’s family . . . .

#### **Culture Shock**

A change in climate, racial differences, geographic surroundings, friends, daily routine, and language all make adolescents remarkably more dependent upon others for direction. This also renders them more malleable . . . .

#### **Distance**

Living in a structured environment, teens start to appreciate Mom and Dad and begin to share their parents’ dream of a united family again . . .

#### READER RESPONSE 2

Each member of the family lives in his/her own special world. In Chapter 6, Julia is sleeping with Scott, her mother is alone in the kitchen, her father is relaxing in his Porsche, and David is languishing in the basement. Write a monologue for each of the characters to describe their thoughts at this point in the narrative. Compare to other students’ responses. Choose your best monologue and combine with those from classmates to perform a reader’s theatre presentation of the Scheeres household.

#### READER RESPONSE 3

What is most damaging to the family is what they do not say to each other rather than what they do talk about. Find a scene in the novel that you feel is the most important missed opportunity for communication of the novel. Rewrite the dialogue to include what the characters should/could have said to each other. Write in Julia’s style and stay true to the characters.

#### READER RESPONSE EXTRA CREDIT

Identify specific scenes in the novel and comment upon how the author’s style shapes the reader’s perception about the events. E-mail the author with particular questions that will serve to clarify the narrative, especially pertaining to her writing style.

**Figure 2.** Reader Response Ideas

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**The reality is that many adolescents do not approach reading *Pride and Prejudice* or *Hamlet* with the same love and enthusiasm that we do. . . . In short: many students are not reading at all. Works such as *Jesus Land* will entice readers of all ability levels because of its themes. A recent *Education Week* (2007) story confirms this, reporting that today's teen readers often prefer the occasionally dark and disturbing contemporary trade books precisely for their real-life conflicts.**

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all eighth graders read at the advanced level and nearly one-third of all ninth graders are two or more years behind the average level of reading achievement and need extra help (Balfanz, McPartland, & Shaw, 2002; Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005). In short: many students are not reading at all. Works such as *Jesus Land* will entice readers of all ability levels because of its themes. A recent *Education Week* (2007) story confirms this, reporting that today's teen readers often prefer the occasionally dark and disturbing contemporary trade books precisely for their real-life conflicts. The dark themes in *Jesus Land* will appeal to many

claims that “sex, politics, and religion are the three traditionally taboo subjects in polite American society—and in young adult literature the greatest of these taboos is religion” (619). Religion, portrayed negatively in this case, is only the beginning. There is also sex, rape, abuse, and cursing. However, given that “any work is potentially censorable by someone, someplace, sometime, for some reason” (Donelson & Nilsen, 2005, 368)—even works as innocent as the dictionary and Judy Blume’s *Are You There, God? It’s Me, Margaret*—teachers have no more reason to worry about this book than they would otherwise.

The reality is that many adolescents do not approach reading *Pride and Prejudice* or *Hamlet* with the same love and enthusiasm that we do. More importantly, a large number of secondary students cannot read such texts. Only three percent of

adolescent readers, even reluctant males, because they will address themselves “questions about justice . . . morality, and the existence of divinity” (Hughes, 1981, 14).

### ***Jesus Land* as Young Adult Literature?**

In my Adolescent Literature course, we use criteria set forth by Carol Jago, Kenneth Donelson and Alleen Nilsen, and Ted Hipple to examine and evaluate young adult literature for classroom use. After reading the assigned young adult novels, the class discussed them utilizing the three forms of evaluation because each focuses on a separate aspect of evaluating and teaching young adult literature: Jago’s to decide about whole-class versus individual study; Donelson and Nilsen’s for characteristics of the best young adult literature, and Hipple’s when discussing young adult literature. As Charles reflects, “It is important to follow a sound method to remind students, parents, and ourselves of a novel’s value in the classroom. Hipple, Jago, and Donelson and Nilsen ask important questions that help to clarify the significance of a novel.” In the sections that follow, using excerpts from the teachers’ final reflections, we analyze and break down the memoir to show how it corresponds to each set of criteria.

### **Jago’s Test for Whole-Class Reading**

Carol Jago, an advocate of teaching great literature with rigorous standards to all students, asserts that “there is an art to choosing books for students” (2004, 47); not all that are assigned and read should be included in the curriculum. Literature that works best for whole-class reading

- is written in language that is perfectly suited to the author’s purpose;
- exposes readers to complex human dilemmas;
- includes compelling, disconcerting characters;
- explores universal themes that combine different periods and cultures;
- challenges readers to reexamine their beliefs; and
- tells a good story with places for laughing and places for crying (47).

My students and I agree that *Jesus Land* fits all of Jago’s criteria; however, as teachers we know there will be issues. Isabel Arteta warns, “using this book as a whole-class book requires a mature, critical group of

students.” In terms of language being suited to the author’s purpose, according to all four teachers, the book meets the first standard. Kristin writes:

In *Jesus Land* the author has an amazing ability to use language that is perfectly suited to her story. Writing about topics that are painful and disturbing, she never glosses over any of the events that took place. However, she is also able to describe them in such a way that the reader is aware of how she tried to remove herself emotionally from the situations she was facing. She is able to disturb the reader, to make us see the significance and the horror of the experiences without asking for pity or using overly emotional language. For example, when she describes being raped by her brother, Jerome, she says:

*I hear him lock the door and creep toward my bed. The mattress tilts under his weight. By the time he touches me, I'm far away. I breathe deeply, pretending to be asleep, falling through layers of numbness, sensation draining from my body like dirty bath water. My mind flits through a collage of images and thoughts—a horse galloping across a field of clover, the conjugation of To Be in French, the marigolds on Deb's table. At some point, the collage fades, and time fades, but somehow I remember to keep breathing.* (78)

In this passage, her language is appropriate to that of a teenage girl. However, it is also powerful and poetic, expressing emotions that perhaps she can only now, as an adult, put into words.

Jago’s second condition, whether a work exposes readers to complex human dilemmas, is also met. Again, I use Kristin’s response in this area.

This book does nothing if not expose the reader to complex human dilemmas. The reader must confront issues of religion, racism, incest, rape, sexuality, and human relationships . . . Julia is torn between being the sister of her two black brothers and being the favored white daughter. She feels sorry for her brothers, that they are treated unfairly by their peers and by their own parents, but at the same time she hates Jerome for the sexual abuse he inflicts on her, and feels resentful toward David when his presence makes popularity at school unattainable. In addition, Julia desires a relationship with her parents, desires to hear them say that they love her, but she also hates her mother for her neglect, and hates her father for the physical abuse he inflicts on her brothers. She also hates their hypocrisy, the way they prioritize foreign missions above their own family, and put on an air of piety at church. She is brutally honest when she talks about the dilemmas that face many teenage girls.

Chad agrees, commenting that “complex human dilemma is the core intent and purpose of the memoir.

Scheeres has eloquently lived through an entire cauldron of human drama and dilemma.”

One common complaint from high school students is that the characters in books they read for school have nothing to do with them. Even in my adolescent literature class, the 20- to 30-year-old students had a hard time relating to some of the characters in the novels they read. However, we all agreed that the characters in *Jesus Land* are compelling, disconcerting, and well-developed. According to Isabel:

The character development in *Jesus Land* is so good that only after a few pages you feel you could recognize them [the mother, Jerome, the father] if you met them on the street. “She’s in one of her moods; we knew it as soon as we returned from our bike ride. She was in the kitchen, ripping coupons from the newspaper, her lips smashed into a hard little line. She didn’t say hello and neither did we. We took one look at her and went downstairs; it’s best to fall under the radar when she gets like this” (16). “The door implodes sucking David into the room. Jerome stands there, tall and glowering in the shadows. He has turned off the intercom, and the blinds are shut. The room smells sour, like dirty laundry. I follow David inside, and Jerome locks the door behind me. He’s several shades darker than David, almost coal-colored. No one would confuse them for brothers” (64). “But somewhere along the line he dropped out of our lives . . . He became a stranger to us, a stranger who comes around to mete out punishment. A stranger whose presence we’ve come to resent” (68).

“Even the minor characters,” says Kristin, “are all painfully real. Scott, Julia’s boyfriend, begins as an attempted gang rapist, then turns to someone who appears to want to date Julia just for sex, and then ultimately professes his love for her and wants to marry her. These changes and contradictions all make the characters seem very real.” This point validates the need for good memoirs to be taught—the characters are real, with real stories to tell and real-life connections to be made.

We concur, too, that this memoir explores universal themes and combines different periods and cultures. Isabel makes the point that “even though the story is set in a

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**“Complex human dilemma is the core intent and purpose of the memoir. Scheeres has eloquently lived through an entire cauldron of human drama and dilemma.”**

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## An Interview with Julia Scheeres

Elizabeth Welsh

### **What caused you to finally sit down and write *Jesus Land*?**

*Jesus Land* had been percolating inside of me for 20 years before I finally sat down to write it. I think gaining the perspective and wisdom of age helped me, as well as becoming a professional writer (I'm a journalist by trade). David's story had been weighing on me all that time, and I felt compelled to tell people about him, about how beautiful and tragic and hopeful a person he was. Immortalizing him in a book was the best way to get his story out there.

### **Did you have concerns about how it would be received by your family?**

No. My main concern was honoring my brother's memory. My family's reactions didn't really factor in—I was going to write the book no matter what.

### **Who do you consider your biggest fan/supporter?**

My husband, Tim Rose. He helped me through some dark days when I had lost hope of selling my book.

### **Was there ever a point where you felt discouraged while writing?**

Sure, when I had to relive (in my mind) a scene in my mind where David was physically abused. After completing such a scene, I'd go lie down on my bed and cry.

### **Was there any one method that helped you put your story onto the page?**

Not really. Aside for forcing myself to sit still and concentrate and to aim for at least 700 words a day when I was in writing—not editing—mode.

### **When you first sat down to write *Jesus Land*, who was your imagined audience?**

I didn't think of a readership. I just thought of David and our experiences together and my need to record them.

### **If you were pitching your memoir to a young adult reader, what would you say to get them hooked?**

Oh, tough question. This is the story of a couple of misfit siblings whose relationship is tested by racism, religious hypocrisy and toxic adults and who emerge stronger because of it.

### **What does winning the ALEX Award mean to you?**

It means that my book appeals to young adults as well as old adults, which means more people will read it and get to know my brother.

### **What would be your response to censorship issues involving schools and parents in light of the language and mature themes presented in *Jesus Land*?**

I think the themes in *Jesus Land* are mild compared to what high school kids are doing these days. And my book is an honest portrayal of themes that do happen to kids, but which adults prefer to ignore or brush under the carpet, including teenage drinking and sex.

### **Was there a reason behind minimizing the roles of your parents within the book? (There's actually a formula that many YA authors follow which calls for the absence of parents)**

I wanted the focus to be my relationship with my brother, not my parents.

### **Do you receive letters/emails from teens? What do they have to say about your memoir?**

I get a lot of emails from people who felt like they were somehow misfits too, growing up. Because of their religious beliefs, skin color, etc. A lot of people write to say they really felt like they knew David after reading my book and wished they could have met him in real life. It's very flattering.

### **Do you have advice for teens who may have a story to tell but only have limited chances to write narratives in school?**

Keep a vivid journal. Don't show it to anyone. You'll love having it in 10, 20, 30 years. Time is so fleeting. Having an artifact of your younger self is precious.

### **What kind of writing did you do in school? What kind of English student were you?**

Depends. I wasn't a good student in high school but while getting my Master's degree in Journalism, I did a lot of writing, obviously. I'm more interested in modern writing than in the classics, possibly do to my impatient nature and background as a no-frills reporter.

### **How did writing *Jesus Land* as a memoir make it more powerful than a fiction presentation?**

Because it's true. Amazing true stories are exponentially more interesting than amazing made-up stories.

### **Does the idea of having your memoir taught as a classroom text appeal to you? How do you feel about the need for memoir/autobiography in the English classroom?**

Sure. I think it's important for students to read true-life stories that either resonate with their own lives or are incredibly different. It gives them a better sense of self and place. Reading autobiographies may also make them feel a little less lonely, knowing that others have also had difficult lives and survived.

specific time and place, the themes explored are timeless and universal. Cultural and religious struggle—as well as bigotry and hypocrisy—plague us today as clearly as 30 years ago.” There is an immediacy of themes, too. “The book discusses the difference between their lives at Lafayette Christian and when they switch to the much larger public high school . . . the culture of school, of their Calvinist church, of their dysfunctional home and of the reform school” (Kristin).

“All through the book the reader is challenged to reexamine beliefs, challenge value systems, at least revise moral standings” (Isabel). Organized religion is portrayed in a negative and hypocritical light: Julia’s parents are zealot-like, yet they emotionally and physically abuse their children, and Escuela Caribe more closely resembles a concentration camp than a Christian reform school. “Maybe this characteristic of the book is the one that may make the book difficult to use as a whole-class assignment. Young adults who read this memoir have to be mature and critical, ready to evaluate the novel within its time and place and then extrapolate from it that which is meaningful to them” (Isabel).

The last criterion, telling a good story with places for laughing and crying, is met, despite the harshness and seriousness of the book. Charles writes that “the last criteria is my favorite . . . in *Jesus Land*, the moment when [the] brother and sister leave the camp for the first time is the funniest because they both started spouting more profanity than they had ever used in their lives—words like ‘papaya ass’ made me laugh.” Kristin did not laugh, but rather found “poignant moments.” She found many moments for crying—Julia’s repeated rapes, their mistreatment at Escuela Caribe, David and Jerome’s physical abuse, and David’s death. To quote her directly,

Even the beautiful moments though, were clouded by a feeling that “this cannot last.” It was beautiful to see brother and sister together, finally free of their bondage, but the whole tone of the book was such that doom seemed imminent at all times. That being said, there were moments that were humorous, even if it was more of a sarcastic than laugh-out-loud kind of humor. The most memorable was when the Sunday School teacher tells their class that they can’t “jack off with Jesus.” Moments like this are plentiful, and make you shake your head.

## Donelson and Nilsen’s Characteristics of the Best Young Adult Literature

In developing their characteristics of the best young adult literature, Donelson and Nilsen (2005, 14-35) referred to numerous sources, including other best book and awards lists (e.g., Printz, Newbery, *School Library Journal*) and professional organizations (such as ALA). Using this list as a guide, we determined that even though it is a memoir aimed at adult readers, *Jesus Land* meets the characteristics, although there were some slight disagreements in a few areas.

1. *Young adult authors write from the viewpoint of young people.* This novel does an amazing job of capturing the struggles of a teenage girl as she grapples with many issues. Her voice and perspective are very clear and easy to identify with. [Written] as a memoir, it is easy to feel that the experiences and feelings are the direct views of the author’s teen years. (Chad)
2. *In young adult books, parents are “removed” so that the adolescent(s) can take the credit.* In this book David and Julia get all the credit. Though they are not orphans, they lack all parental support and guidance. The parents are emotionally out of the picture, and David and Julia are left to deal with their own serious problems at home and at school . . . in the end, they don’t triumph over all adversity, but they are able to achieve freedom. (Kristin)
3. *Young adult literature is fast-paced.* Many instances in the book are absolutely captivating. This book was definitely hard to put down, yet did so without sacrificing depth and description. (Chad)

Sometimes the story runs with the speed of bikes, at other times it almost screeches to a halt as the characters are faced with more trying times. “His numbness, his refusal to accept what is happening by refusing to react—all this is familiar. Things are done to you and you can’t do anything back.

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**David and Julia are left to deal with their own serious problems at home and at school . . . in the end, they don’t triumph over all adversity, but they are able to achieve freedom.**

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And so you play dead. Because if you don't acknowledge something, it isn't real. It doesn't happen" (308). (Isabel)

4. *Young adult literature includes a variety of genres and subjects.*

This novel used a variety of intimate and personal themes to attract the reader. I found the elements of religion, race, sex, and family to be profoundly impacting and very well developed . . . readers could easily use these themes to segue into meaningful guided discussion. (Chad)

5. *Young adult literature includes stories about characters from many different ethnic and cultural groups. Jesus Land definitely addresses different ethnic and cultural groups.*

Obviously there is the issue of a white family "raising" two black sons. But there is also the issue of the conservative and religious culture in Indiana, contrasted with its overt racism

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**The book is full of down moments, but her character and struggles are amazingly positive as is her selflessness and attitude towards the array of negativity in her life and journey. This type of perseverance seems a great way to attempt to connect to borderline and troubled students.**

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and hypocrisy . . . we also get a glimpse into Dominican life and culture. (Kristin)

6. *Young adult books are basically optimistic, with characters making worthy accomplishments.* Julia is an extremely memorable and gracious character. The book is full of down moments, but her character and struggles are amazingly positive as is her selflessness and attitude towards the array of negativity in her life and journey. This type of perseverance seems a great way to attempt to connect to borderline and troubled students. (Chad)
7. *Successful young adult novels deal with emotions that are important to young adults.* The emotions dealt with—wanting acceptance, not fitting in, getting

taunted, making friends, loving and hating siblings, not relating to parents, finding a first romantic relationship and dealing with its complexities, and challenging authority—are all things that young people can relate to. (Kristin)

Although a higher-level text, the situations and emotions in the book are very applicable and relevant to today's high school student . . . the biggest strength of the book is the realistic emotions and reactions attached to these circumstances . . . all readers can identify with this. (Chad)

### Ted Hipple's Discussion Method

I have taken one of Ted Hipple's assignments<sup>1</sup>, used for discussing *The Catcher in the Rye*, and modified it for use with any novel. His ten questions center on more personal reactions, such as how the novel agrees with a reader's personal beliefs and its emotional impact (See Figure 3).

From reading the teachers' analyses and evaluations of the novel, it is clear that Hipple's set of questions "squared" with them the most and they produced writing nearly as beautiful as Scheeres'.

Isabel's final paper introduction says it perfectly: "it is really important to state . . . that when a book touches you in so many different ways, when you feel

#### EVALUATION OF [INSERT TITLE]

Ted Hipple, one of the leaders in young adult literature, used the following points for evaluation when discussing young adult literature. One of the expressions he used was, "de gustibus non disputandum," which basically means there's no accounting for taste!

- (a)—clarity—how clear is the novel?
- (b)—escape—how much can you lose yourself in it?
- (c)—reflections of real life—how true is the novel to human fact, to human nature?
- (d)—artistry in details—how artistic are the details of the novel? (name some your particularly liked)
- (e)—internal consistency—do the parts and the whole fit together?
- (f)—emotional impact—what is the impact of the novel on you emotionally? (think in terms of duration, intensity, recurrence, and universality)
- (g)—personal beliefs—how does the novel square with your personal beliefs?
- (h)—significant insights—are the ideas in the novel significant?
- (i)—shareability—how much do others agree with you on these judgments?
- (j)—yea/boo—why can't I explain my feelings about this work?

Figure 3. Hipple Evaluation (adapted for classroom use)

for the characters so deeply, when you trudge with them through the muck and when you rebel with your own impotence to change the world, an objective evaluation is far from attainable. That being said, the Ted Hipple criteria are probably better suited for analysis than any other.”

- *How clear is the novel?*

*Jesus Land* is crystal clear because the author is not simply making up a story. Instead, she is speaking from the heart and the events reflect her personal involvement and honest depiction of her vivid experiences. (Charles)

- *How much can you lose yourself in it?*

It is difficult to say if you can lose yourself in the book, or you want to escape from its story. It is one of those books you do not want to stop reading, while at the same time you really want it to stop; you want to go back to the apparent normality of your own life. (Isabel)

This novel is easy to become lost in. As discussed in our literature circles, even the first two paragraphs and subsequent introduction to the setting and characters pull the reader in from the beginning with imagery of a cow shit stench slamming up their noses and the “This here is Jesus Land” etched plywood. It was the hardest novel to put down that I’ve read in a long time. (Chad)

- *How true is the novel to human fact, to human nature?*

The book invites the reader to reflect on every aspect of human nature, especially in the enormous potential for evil and good that each one has and how each one chooses to live it. As for human fact, a memoir so devoid of pity, brimming with extremely detailed accounts of a very human life in a very inhumane world cannot ring truer. (Isabel)

In *Jesus Land*, every sentence is testimony to the horrors and wonders of human nature. (Charles)

- *How artistic are the details of the novel?*

The details are incredibly well-done, though to say artistic makes it sound like they were beautiful and almost unreal. That seems like a stretch for a book this brutal. They were artistic in that they made the story so real, so like real life, like the real teenage years. For instance:

As soon as Reverend Dykstra pronounced the final “amen” and bustled down the aisle toward

the narthex, Rick and I would rush up the back stairway to the windowless attic, where we’d feel our way through fusty stacks of Psalter Hymnals and the cool satin of choir robes to a cushionless sofa. There, we’d sit facing each other in the darkness, taking turns running a fingertip over each other’s palms, without speaking, as bats fluttered overhead and cars honked faintly in the parking lot. After Rick’s glow-in-the-dark wristwatch marked five minutes, we’d slip back down the staircase to reunite with our families.

These fingertip caresses were exquisite, amplified by our inability to see the lust and embarrassment in each other’s faces. There was only a tingling sensation and our open-mouthed breathing. (84) (Kristin)

- *Do the parts and the whole fit together?*

All of the thoughts and feelings are brought together with extreme consistency, each new turn providing more foundation to support the arguments made (from “In God We Trust” to “Trust No One” to the “Epilogue”) (Isabel)

- *What is the impact of the novel on you emotionally?*

As you go through the story, recurring thoughts of helplessness and disbelief take hold. How could they have survived this? When are those religious values they talk about so much going to engage, to become actions? Where are the good people, the normal ones? Are there any good normal people? Emotional impact is enormous. (Isabel)

On the most basic level, I felt anger. I squeezed the book many times. I stopped to breathe and collect myself a few times. I almost fell asleep holding the book at night after I finished it, like it was a physical being that I could hold and console and relate to. (Chad)

- *How does the novel*

*square with your personal beliefs?*

This novel really affected me in a positive, yet harsh way . . . I almost feel sad that it didn’t shock me . . . Instead, it fell right in line with how I think our society has deterio-

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**On the most basic level, I felt anger. I squeezed the book many times. I stopped to breathe and collect myself a few times.**

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rated and left teens to feel scared or embarrassed to make decisions that are contrary to one or all of the predominant social constructs in their environment. (Chad)

- *Are the ideas in the novel significant? How much do others agree with you on these judgments?*

Definitely. (Chad)

When we discussed the book, we found absolute agreement in almost all of our opinions. The general statement was that the book was a powerful, well-written account of a very sad life. (Isabel)

- *Yea/boo?*

It was hard to read, but I'm glad I did. (Kristin)

The final conclusion: YEA! Even though you end up totally devastated when you finish the book, you want to read it again. (Isabel)

## Conclusion

Shortly after reading the book, I emailed Julia asking if one of my students, Elizabeth, could interview her for her class paper (see p. 74). With kindness and trust not often found in this world, Julia emailed back with her phone number letting me know I could call any time. That began a correspondence that continued through Elizabeth's interview, my two-week stint in a third-world country, and a busy semester. It is precisely this personal, friendly, unguarded persona that makes *Jesus Land* what it is. As a reader, you (I use this term on purpose) feel a personal connection to Julia, David, and their story. It is as if each and every reader is a "you" who can expect a phone call or email from Julia at any time.

Julia, and her book, hold true to the claim that through them, we are introduced to "real people" and "develop a partnership with the narrator-subject as we receive the self-disclosure and willing confidences that are so hard-won in our everyday friendships" (Milner & Milner, 2003, p. 252). Such relationships are rare . . . and so is a book as powerfully poignant as *Jesus Land*.

<sup>1</sup> After Ted died in 2004, I found this assignment. I am not sure if he created it or "borrowed" it from another source.

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### The Sounds of Stories

I remember vividly Charles Laughton, the great actor of screen and stage, traveling all over and doing readings from great books. The audiences were mesmerized. Bill Martin, Jr., used to be a spectacular performer as a storyteller at IRA and NCTE. How we listened and how we cheered. People rushed to get copies of the books being used in these presentations.

Today we are blessed with audiobooks. Students should be able to listen and find the magic of interpretation as actors read aloud or participate in dramatizations based on the finest young adult literature.

Here are a few worthy of note:

1. *Melting Stones* by Tamora Pierce. Read by Grace Kelly and the Full Cast Family. Full Cast Audio.
2. *Twisted* by Laurie Halse Anderson. Read by Mike Chamberlain. Listening Library.
3. *Airborn* by Kenneth Oppel. Read by David Kelly and the Full Cast Family. Full Cast Audio.
4. *Evil Genius* by Catherine Jinks. Read by Justine Eyre. Listening Library.

5. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hollows* by J. K. Rowling. Read by Jim Dale. Listening Library.
6. *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing: Volume One-The Pox Party* by M. T. Anderson. Read by Peter Francis James. Listening Library.
7. *Fairest* by Gail Carson Levine. Read and sung by Sarah Naughton and the Full Cast Family. Full Cast Audio.
8. *Evolution, Me & Other Freaks of Nature* by Robin Brande. Read by Kaili Vernoff. Listening Library.
9. *The Rules of Survival* by Nancy Werlin. Read by Daniel Passer. Listening Library.
10. *On the Wings of Heroes* by Richard Peck. Read by Lincoln Hoppe. Listening Library.

11. *Last Shot* by John Feinstein. Read by John Feinstein.
12. *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* by Paula Danziger. Read by Caitlin Brodnick and the Full Cast Family. Full Cast Audio.

Great listening. Letting students read aloud from their favorite books, emphasizing dramatic techniques and interpretation, is a practical way to develop fluency, listening skills, and oral interpretation. Highly motivating.

#### Remembering the Holocaust

For too many students the Holocaust is at a time and place that might be equal to the American Revolution or the Civil War. While there are numerous books about Anne Frank and many other survivors or their friends and families, the emotional impact is not the same for those who lived during that time and remember World War II.

DK, in association with USC Shoah Foundation Institute, has published *Holocaust: The Events and Their Impact on Real People* in which survivors tell their stories on DVD. It is stunning with pictures and text, as well as the DVD, to remind the world that this should

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**For too many students the Holocaust is at a time and place that might be equal to the American Revolution or the Civil War.**

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**Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L. F. Nilsen have provided a most interesting, fun, thought-provoking book, *Names and Naming in Young Adult Literature*, Scarecrow Press.**

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never happen again to any people anywhere in the world. The text is written by Angela Gluck Wood. Steven Spielberg has done the foreword. An important book.

**The Naming Game**

Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L. F. Nilsen have provided a most interesting, fun, thought-provoking book, *Names and Naming in Young Adult Literature*, Scarecrow Press. They make a great case for showing that teens are very much interested in names, particularly in this age of computers and technology. Names are definitely important in self-identity. (I once had a student who had the name of Marilyn Monroe and had no resemblance to that celebrity in any way, shape or manner. It was embarrassing for her in many ways.)

The book discusses nicknames, friendly and mischievous, labeling people with “names,” according to their positions, actions, and personal characteristics. The authors provide interesting insights in how names are chosen to reveal class consciousness, ethnicity

(maybe rank), historical and cultural contexts. There are interesting reminders that in a number of novels, the authors take the time to explain how various characters got their names, such as Ratchet in *The Canning Season*.

J.K. Rowling, Louis Sachar, M. E. Kerr, M. T. Anderson, Walter Dean Myers, M. E. Kerr, and Cynthia Kadohata are just a few of the many authors’ works analyzed in this stimulating book. I must admit, that before I read this, I only on occasion thought of the naming game in certain books. But my eyes have been opened, and I thank these authors for their excellent analyses. Most worthwhile.

**Making Time for Reading**

After the ALAN workshop in New York City, I came home with loads of books and the desire to read and read and read. While every book I list here might not be a prizewinner, I think this list is worthy of exploring. As usual, I try to list titles according to a basic theme. Select and have fun.

**Cultural Diversity**

Sherman Alexie. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*. Little, Brown.  
Kim Antineau. *Broken Moon*. McElderry.  
Lori Carlson, ed. *Moccasin Thunder: American Indian Stories for Today*. HarperCollins.  
Walter Dean Myers. *Harlem Summer*. Scholastic.  
Jacqueline Woodson. *Feathers*. Putnam.

**On the Lighter Side**

Mary Hershey. *The One Where the Kid Nearly Jumps to His Death*

and *Lands in California* Razorbill.

Jeff Kinney. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Rodrick Rules*. Amulet.  
Gregory Maguire. *One Final Firecracker*. Clarion.  
Dyan Sheldon. *Confessions of a Hollywood Star*. Candlewick.  
Wendelin Van Draanen. *Confessions of a Serial Kisser*. Knopf.

**Short Stuff: Short Stories and Tales**

David Almond and Others. *Click: One Novel, Ten Authors*. Arthur Levine/Scholastic.  
Donald R. Gallo, ed. *What Are You Afraid of? Stories about Phobias*. Candlewick.  
James Houston. *Treasury of Inuit Legends*. Harcourt.  
David Levithan. *How They Met and Other Stories*. Knopf.  
M. Jerry Weiss and Helen S. Weiss, eds. *Dreams and Visions*. Tor.

**Biographies**

Jan Adkins. *Up Close: Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect*. Viking.  
Jack Batten. *Silent in an Evil Time: The Brave War of Edith Cavell*. Tundra.  
Ken Rappaport. *Ladies First: Women Athletes Who Made a Difference*. Peachtree.  
Carla Killough McClafferty. *Something Out of Nothing: Marie Curie and Radium*. Farrar Straus Giroux.  
Jenna Bush. *Ana’s Story: A Journey of Hope*. Harper Collins.

**Tales through Poetry**

Kelly Bingham. *Shark Girl*. Candlewick.  
Helen Frost. *The Braid*. Farrar Straus Giroux.  
Nikki Grimes. *Dark Sons*. Hyperion.

Ellen Hopkins. *Glass*. McElderry.  
Sonya Sones. *What My Girlfriend  
Doesn't Know*. Simon and  
Schuster.

### **Graphic Novels**

Nick Abadzis. *Laika*. :01 First  
Second.

Richard Appignanesi, adaptor,  
illustrated by Emma Viecelli.  
*Manga Shakespeare: Hamlet*.  
Amulet.

Eoin Colfer and Andrew Donkin,  
illustrated by Giovanni Rigano  
and Paolo Lamanna. *Artemis  
Fowl: The Graphic Novel*.  
Hyperion.

Brian Jacques, illustrated by Bret  
Blevins. *Redwall: The Graphic  
Novel*.

Lat. *Town Boy*. :01 First Second.

### **The Impact of Wars**

Wilborn Hampton. *War in the  
Middle East: A Reporter's Story*.  
Candlewick.

Dean Hughes. *Search and Destroy*.  
Simon Pulse.

Walter Dean Myers. *Sunrise over  
Fallujah*. Scholastic.

Mirijam Pressler. *Let Sleeping Dogs  
Lie*. Front Street.

Meg Tillet. *Porcupine*. Tundra.

### **Friendships**

Meg Cabot. *How to be Popular! A  
Novel*. Harper Tempest.

Dennis and Elise Carr. *Welcome to  
Wahoo*. Bloomsbury.

Walter Dean Myers. *Street Love*.  
Amistad/Harper Tempest.

Jerry Spinelli. *Love, Stargirl*. Knopf.

Jacqueline Woodson. *After Tupac &  
D Foster*. Putnam.

### **Bedside: Very Special People**

S. A. Horazin. *Blood Brothers*.  
Delacorte.

Amy Goldman Koss. *Side Effects*.  
Roaring Brook Press.

Per Nilsson. *Seventeen*. Front Street.

Terry Rueman. *Inside Out*. Harper  
Tempest.

Ellen Yeomans. *Rubber Houses*.  
Little, Brown.

### **School Days**

Pamela Ehrenberg. *Ethan, Sus-  
pended*. Eerdmans.

Gordon Korman. *Schooled*.  
Hyperion.

Michael Laser. *Cheater*. Dutton.

Catherine Gilbert Murdock. *The Off  
Season*. Houghton Mifflin.

Francine Prose. *Bullyville*. Harper  
Teen.

# NCTE PRESENTS...

## Lesson Plans for Creating Media-Rich Classrooms

*Edited by Mary T. Christel and Scott Sullivan*

In today's media-rich society, media literacy has become critical to the academic development of our students. By developing students' media literacy skills, not only can we help them to become more sophisticated readers and consumers of media, but we can also help to increase their involvement and literacy skills in other areas. Whether you are just starting to introduce your students to media literacy or are looking for new ideas to revitalize your curriculum, the 27 field-tested lessons in *Lesson Plans for Creating Media-Rich Classrooms* will help you to integrate media literacy concepts and skills into existing curricula. Each lesson includes a rationale, a description of the activity, assessment suggestions, and connections and adaptations to larger curriculum contexts and other commonly used texts. Contributors also connect their lessons to a set of objectives and to the NCTE/IRA standards. Specific lessons include:

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Traci Gardner

Effective student writing begins with well-designed classroom assignments. In *Designing Writing Assignments*, veteran educator Traci Gardner offers practical ways for teachers to develop assignments that will allow students to express their creativity and grow as writers and thinkers while still addressing the many demands of resource-stretched classrooms.

She explores how to balance pedagogical and curricular goals with the needs of multiple learners while managing everyday challenges such as mandates, testing, and the paper load.

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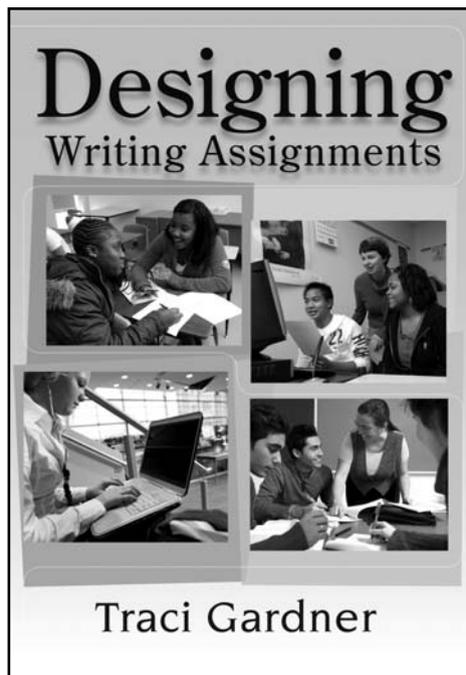
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*Deborah Dean*

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119 pp. 2008. Grades 9–12. ISBN 978-0-8141-1841-2.

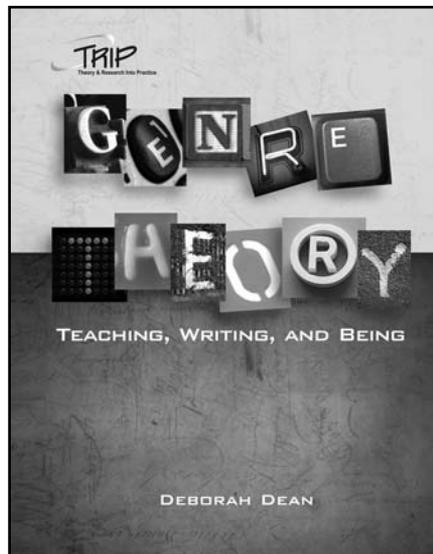
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