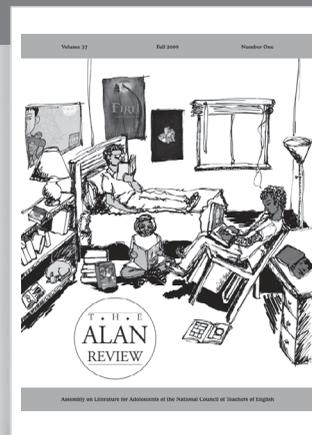


Volume 37

Number 1

Fall 2009



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**ABOUT THE ALAN REVIEW.** *The ALAN Review* is a peer-reviewed (refereed) journal published by the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English. It is devoted solely to the field of literature for adolescents. It is published three times per academic year (fall, winter, and summer) and is sent to all members, individual and institutional, of ALAN (The Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE). Members of ALAN need not be members of NCTE.

**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.

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

**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."

**MANUSCRIPT FORMAT.** Manuscripts should be **double-spaced** throughout, including quotations and bibliographies. A **title page** with author's name, affiliation, address, and a short professional biographical sketch should be included. The author's name should not appear on the manuscript pages; however, pages should be numbered. Short quotations, as permitted under "fair use" in the copyright law, must be carefully **documented within the manuscript** and in the bibliography. Longer quotations and complete poems or short stories must be accompanied by **written permission** of the copyright owner.

Author interviews should be accompanied by **written permission of the interviewed author** to publish the interview in *The ALAN Review*. Interviewers should indicate to authors that publication is subject to review of an editorial board. The title of *The ALAN Review* should not be used to gain an interview.

Original short **tables and figures** should be **double-spaced** and placed on a **separate sheet** at the end of the manuscript. Notations should appear in the text for proper placement of tables and figures.

*The ALAN Review* prefers the use of the Publications Manual of the Modern Language Association (MLA).

**SUBMITTING THE MANUSCRIPT.** Authors are to submit manuscripts electronically to alanreview@lsu.edu. In the subject line please write: **ALAN manuscript submission**. All manuscripts should be in a recent version of Microsoft Word and use MLA format. Complete submissions include, as separate attachments, the following documents: (1) A manuscript without references to the author(s). (2) A separate title page with author's name, contact information, affiliation, and a 2-3 sentence biographical sketch. In the case of multiple authors, the author submitting the manuscript will serve as the primary contact unless stipulated otherwise. (3) A brief statement that the article is original, has not been published previously in other journals and/or books, and is not a simultaneous submission.

**REVIEW PROCESS.** Each manuscript will receive a blind review by the editor and at least two members of the editorial review board, unless the length, style, or content makes it inappropriate for publication. Usually, authors should expect to hear the results within eight weeks. Manuscripts are judged for the contribution they make to the field of adolescent literature, clarity and cohesiveness, timeliness, and freshness of approach. Selection also depends on the manuscript's contribution to the overall balance of the journal.

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

**Manuscripts that are accepted may be edited for clarity, accuracy, readability, and publication style.**

Upon publication, the author will receive two copies of *The ALAN Review* in which the article appears. Publication usually occurs within 18 months of acceptance.

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

<b>FALL ISSUE Deadline:</b>	<b>MARCH 1</b>
<b>WINTER ISSUE Deadline:</b>	<b>JULY 1</b>
<b>SUMMER ISSUE Deadline:</b>	<b>NOVEMBER 1</b>

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## From the Editors

On Growing Up, Coming of Age, and Gaining Stature: Young Adult Literature in and out of Schools

(Melanie) have been in school as either teacher or student for thirty-seven of my forty-two years; I've been in school so long that I mark the passing of time in school years rather than calendar years. I do something similar when I mark the passing of time in young adult literature (YAL)—there's Before *The Outsiders*, After *The Outsiders*, Before Harry Potter, After Harry Potter . . . time is marked in beginnings and significant changes. School years and YAL years came together for me during my first year of teaching.

I graduated from college a *very* typical English major who intended to teach the classics—Shakespeare and Austin, Whitman and Dickinson—and *my* students were going to love them. I was going to find that magical approach that would reach all of my students. I loved books and kids—how could I not reach them? I took a job teaching seventh grade in a lovely town outside of a large metropolitan city. I intended to teach seventh grade only one year (surely, the administration would see that I was destined for greater things) and then move to high school, where my vision of an English classroom would be realized. Although I had no experience with seventh graders, I wasn't really worried. My student teaching experience had been with ninth graders (really, how much difference could two years make?), and there would be a textbook that I could use for content guidance.

I arrived at my new school to learn some very interesting facts: 1) It was textbook adoption year; 2) I was on a new team that had been created because the school had a sudden influx of students; and 3) The book room had been flooded during a particularly

rainy summer season and my textbooks were soaked and soggy, moldy and smelly. As it was a textbook adoption year, the school did not have money to replace textbooks that would only be used for one year. I would have to make do with the books with the least amount of damage. So there I was—no experience in middle school and no textbooks. That could have been a recipe for disaster; however, I had something really special at that school—a fantastic media specialist and an instructional lead teacher (ILT) who knew how to work with and mentor new teachers.

The media specialist helped me get reading group sets and class sets of young adult novels to use with my students, and my ILT helped me rethink my vision of students. That year, my students and I read *The Bridge to Terabithia* (Patterson), *A Wrinkle in Time* (L'Engle), *Dogsong* (Paulsen), *Number the Stars* (Lowry), and several other texts (all novels referenced in this introduction are listed in a bibliography at the end). It was a life-changing experience reading these texts with students. It is not so much the texts that I remember as life-changing, but rather the experience of reading those texts with students who were deeply engaged. My seventh graders came to class prepared to talk about what they had read; we had heated discussions about characterization, theme, and symbolism. Equally important as those conversations were the ones we had about how these stories connected with their lives. My students were willing to talk about the literary elements of a text, but they also wanted, *needed*, to talk about how they saw themselves in the texts. Karey, a student in sixth period, wrote,

I know how Annemarie felt when the Germans took her uncle's lunch and searched her basket. Last year on the way to school, two boys stopped me and my friend and took our lunches and went through our backpacks. They threw our stuff on the ground and kicked it. The whole time I kept hoping that they wouldn't find the money Mom gave me for the fieldtrip. The boys were mean like the Nazis and made us scared because they could. Annemarie's experience reminded me of my experience and I understood her being so scared and mad.

Karey connected her life experiences with the life experiences of a character in a novel set fifty years prior to her birth. Another student, Matt, connected with Russel, the main character in *Dogsong*. He wrote,

I been hunting for as long as I can remember. Russel keeps repeating that she would die, he would die, and the dogs would die. Saying it over and over again makes it more important. It makes me pay attention to the words. This one time I went hunting with my dad and uncle and we got separated. I kept saying the directions they'd told me over and over again so I wouldn't forget. They became the most important thing for me. Like Russel, I focused on that and [not ] the stuff that didn't matter.

My experiences with that seventh-grade class and those texts reshaped what I thought about teaching, about literature, and about what counts as an important and rich text for adolescents. Before this experience, I would have argued that students needed to read the same texts that I had as a student in order to have something weighty to talk about; before this experience, I would have argued for the canon, the classics as texts for students in English classes. I began my growing up as a teacher that year; I recognized my students' deep need to see themselves in what they were reading, to connect their lives to characters, and to talk about their reading with other people.

It's been twenty years since my first teaching experience with young adult literature, and I have marked the passing of those years in novels. This past year, we marked ten years since the publication of *Speak* (Anderson); I get a lump in my throat each time I talk about this novel because of how it touched the life of one specific student. *Speak* was one of the books that disappeared from my classroom library eight years ago. I didn't think anything of it as I was preparing my list of books that needed to be replaced; it was just a book that was missing . . . until Marissa walked into my classroom. She said, "This book saved my life" and held out the missing copy of *Speak*. It was battered with writing and sticky notes on nearly

every page. Like Melinda, Marissa had been raped by someone who went to her, our, school.

Over the years, other books have helped students deal with issues in their lives—*Annie on My Mind* (Garden), *Crank* (Hopkins), *What Is Goodbye?* (Grimes), *Rats Saw God* (Thomas), *The House You Pass on the Way* (Woodson)—and I think about how my view of young adult literature has grown up and come of age. I don't look at young adult literature and see books that are best for struggling readers or for readers who need to see themselves in texts. I see young adult literature as Literature—texts that are rich, deep, and meaningful. I look at the books in my classroom library I have to replace each year—from *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (Crutcher) to *ttyl* (Myracle) to *The Lightning Thief* (Riordan) to *Speak* (Anderson) to *Unwind* (Shusterman)—and still feel that sense of wonder that I felt when I realized as a first-year teacher that my students could and would engage deeply with texts.

The ways in which my students interact with texts has changed in the past twenty years. While they still want to read and talk about texts, students often have an expectation that the book will be part of a larger media experience. Keith, a high school student, said, "I don't want just a book. I want more. I want to read it and then play it and then see it. I like it when books have movies and games and websites." Many young adult authors realize this expectation and are responding with multimedia experiences for young adults. Like Keith, Sarah sees books as part of a larger social environment; she expects to be able to read a book and then have more "stuff" to do with it. She said, "I like when there are lots of books in a series so I can really get into like the whole world. I like the books that have a website that I can go to and get more stuff from. Games and chats and forums and stuff." Young adult literature is coming of age along with its readers.

The articles for this issue all address the theme of "Young Adult Literature Gaining Stature at the High School Level." We begin with an article by a first-year teacher, Kate Featherston. Her account traces her successful incorporation of YAL into her English Language Learners (ELL) classroom full of reluctant and struggling readers. Next, Candence Robillard examines the popularity of *Twilight* by analyzing student responses to the novel as she explores what

these responses reveal about gender roles and readers' expectations within the larger genre of vampire novels. Anete Vásquez explains how ninth-grade "at-risk" students can produce a close literary examination of Alex Flinn's novel, *Breathing Underwater*. Crag Hill's article explains a collaborative teaching unit between an English teacher and a health teacher. Using Angela Johnson's *The First Part Last*, the teachers combine efforts in the sex education unit of a high school Health class.

Through a close reading of *American Born Chinese*, Rosemary Hathaway describes how not only traditional texts provide intertextuality, but how other cultural texts, videos, toys, and children's chants can also support and enhance deep intertextual readings. Nicole Westenskow provides an introduction to the young adult literature of New Zealand. In a global world, we can be more responsible teachers if we have more books to offer our students that can connect them to the rest of the world.

In our last article, "An Almost Young Adult Literature Study," Lisa Hazlett, Angela Beumer Johnson, and Judith Hayn tackle the difficulties and frustration of explaining a failed research study. They describe current problems around the research in our field and then point to possible next steps for establishing a stronger research base for the continued efforts of legitimizing the field.

In our section Something about the Author, we have two interviews. Catherine Ross-Stroud conducted Janet McDonald's last interview before her death to cancer in 2007. McDonald's works have been an important voice for the experiences of African American teens, and Ross-Stroud provides a brief survey of her work along with the interview. Jacqueline Bach offers an interview with Rick Riordan. Riordan's Percy Jackson series has been exciting readers for the last several years with the adventures of a group of modern-day demi-gods. Who says that the study of mythology can't be exciting?

This issue's Connections section has two columns and introduces a new feature that we hope offers an opportunity to hear more of your voices. Peter Gutiérrez's column, Integrating Graphica into Your Curriculum: Recommended Titles for Grades 6–12, provides a thoughtful introduction to strong graphic novels "that contain significant literary merit and can accomplish multiple curricular goals." In "Beyond

Relevance to Literary Merit: Young Adult Literature as 'Literature,'" Anna Soter and Sean Connors argue that young adult literature has come of age for young people in terms of its relevance and its literary value. Our new feature, which we are calling Stories from the Field, highlights your experiences with young adult literature. We hope teachers, librarians, critics, students, and readers might offer interesting insights into how they have used this literature in a variety of settings. In this issue, Matt Skillen shows how young adult literature influences a student's behavior at home, and Kathleen Richard reports on reading *Twilight* through her students' reading response journals.

We hope you enjoy these pieces as much as we have. We look forward to your comments, whatever they may be.

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# Call for Manuscripts

## Submitting a Manuscript:

Manuscript submission guidelines are available on p. 2 of this issue and on our website at <http://www.alan-ya.org/the-alan-review/>. **Note:** *The ALAN Review* is adjusting its submission deadlines to allow more time for editing and production. *The January 2010 deadline below represents a change from previous versions of this call.* Beginning with the Fall 2010 issue, deadlines will be announced as follows: Fall issue, March 1; Winter issue, July 1; Summer issue, November 1.

## 2010 Winter Theme: Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century: “Scattering Light” on Our Freedom to Think, See, and Imagine

The theme of this issue asks us to imagine what it means to “scatter light” using young adult literature. Which pioneers in our field have encouraged us to “scatter light”? Which novels or poems encourage young readers to think about their pasts as they continue in the future? How does young adult literature help readers deal with adolescent issues as they think, see, and imagine those futures? What texts give “voice [to those who have] been pushed down hard” by school or society? This theme is meant to be open to interpretation, and we welcome manuscripts addressing pedagogy as well as theoretical concerns. General submissions are also welcome. Submission deadline: **October 15, 2009**

## 2010 Summer Theme: Interplay: Influence of Film, New Media, Digital Technology, and Image on YA Literature

The lines between various forms of media are frequently blurred for young adult readers; young adult novels increasingly have some combination of websites, blogs, fanfiction, and video games to accompany them. The theme of this issue asks us to consider the influences of film, new media, digital technology, and image on young adult novels. What does the interplay between digital media and young adult literature look like? How is young adult literature being influenced by digital media? What roles do film and image play in young adult literature? What are the reading experiences of young adults who “read” books in multiple media? Which novels and novel media help readers to question or critique society and the world? This theme is meant to be open to interpretation, and we welcome manuscripts addressing pedagogy as well as theoretical concerns. General submissions are also welcome. Submission deadline: **January 5, 2010**

## 2010 Fall Theme: Can I teach this? What does YA literature look like in the classroom?

One of the most frequent comments we hear from our preservice teachers is how much they like young adult literature, but how unprepared they feel to “teach” it in their future classrooms. They are worried not only about possible censorship issues, but also about whether or not the quality of YA literature is comparable to the “classics.” For this issue, we are seeking a broad range of articles that explore the ways teachers incorporate YA literature in the classroom. What are your experiences teaching YAL at any level? How do you prepare new teachers? How does teaching YAL compare with teaching the classics? How does it meet or trouble the standards in your environment? What are some quality texts that have been rewarding in the hands of students? This theme is meant to be open to interpretation, and we welcome manuscripts addressing pedagogy as well as theoretical concerns. General submissions are also welcome. Submission deadline: **March 1, 2010**

## New Section

Got a story about young adult literature you’d like to share? We are starting a new section featuring brief vignettes (no more than 300 words) from practicing teachers and librarians who would like to share their interactions with students, parents, colleagues, and administrators around YA literature.

# The Transforming Power of Young Adult Literature

In total silence (save for the occasional flutter of a turning page), Daisy (all student names have been changed), one of my 9th-grade English Language Learners (ELL) who began the year reading at a 3rd-grade level, eagerly works through Stephenie Meyer’s *Breaking Dawn*, her fourth book in the *Twilight* series. Meanwhile Juan, a football player with straight Ds except for his A in English, is on the edge of his seat, flipping between *Flowers for Algernon* (Keyes) and his newly acquired pocket dictionary. Ty, who prior to this year had “never finished a book” but has now completed every Sharon Draper novel I own, is actually poring over the latest issue of *The ALAN Review*; when I whispered to him that it features an interview with Draper, he snatched the magazine from my hand, cut me off with a rushed “Sssshh!” and impatiently waved me away from his desk. In the back of the room, Kelly, possibly my toughest case—a frighteningly mature and, dare I say, *malicious* freshman—takes out her headphones and tears herself away from texting her latest love interest in order to concentrate fully on reading Julie Anne Peters’s *Luna* . . . for the second time around.

An outsider looking in on my sixth-period freshman English class as they voraciously read their self-selected books would never

believe what I walked into on the first day of school: a chaotic classroom exploding with some of the most unmotivated, disengaged, out-of-control nonreaders an English teacher could ever hope *not* to encounter. By mid-September, rumors had surfaced claiming, “Ms. Featherston’s sixth period is where they put all the bad kids—she got stuck with them because she’s new.” At the time, I considered the possibility that the kids knew something I didn’t, but eight months later, I drive to school each morning happily looking forward to period six. So, what happened?

At the start of this year, I was stunned by the seemingly insurmountable classroom management challenges I faced, as well my 9th- and 10th-grade students’ abysmal reading levels and utter lack of reading experience. In an effort to address both of these problems and stay loyal to the very progressive English teacher training I received, I decided to implement an independent reading program centered on high-interest young adult literature (YAL). The idea was to a) focus and engage my students with a structured, silent activity at the start of each lesson, b) provide them with an opportunity to develop and practice much-needed reading skills, and c) encourage them to recognize the inherent

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**Ty, who prior to this year had “never finished a book” but has now completed every Sharon Draper novel I own, is actually poring over the latest issue of *The ALAN Review*.**

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value of reading books. My most optimistic expectation was to make some sort of progress on engaged silent reading; now, toward the end of the year, each of my three original goals has been reached beyond my most naïve, starry-eyed hopes.

## Steps to Success

### Step 1: Instruction

Although I was extremely eager to put books in my reluctant students' hands, a quick diagnostic assessment based on Beers's (2003) advice revealed they did not possess the skills to comprehend or enjoy even the most interesting, self-selected book. Although the majority of my students were able to decode words and could technically "read," they were incapable of meaningful engagement with text, so I spent a couple of weeks on whole-class mini-lessons using fast-paced, relatable short stories and other rapport-building read-alouds to introduce and practice basic reading strategies. Once several simple benchmark assessments suggested my students' near-mastery of questioning, predicting, visualizing, summarizing, and responding, they were ready to start reading on their own.

### Step 2: Motivation

I understood that in order to get my students to read anything, I would have to provide them with some kind of extrinsic motivation—but I refused to resort to the boring assessments students usually dread, such as book reports and reading quizzes. Amid engaging and valuable mini-lessons provided in Gallagher's motivation-building book *Reading Reasons*, I put into practice a simple and obvious point system: every day at the start of class, my students are required to come in, sit down, and read whatever book they've selected until I say, "Time's up." If they do this, they receive a five-point classwork grade; if they fail to do this, they receive a zero.

It took about a week for the entire class to catch on that zeroes every day really do a number on your grade, and sitting in silence pretending to read is actually more boring than reading. Before I knew it, I had 10–15 minutes of genuine, page-turning silence at the start of each class. Best of all, this system reinforced what I was trying to prove to my students: reading, in

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**I reminded my students that it's okay to "abandon" a book if it's not enjoyable (after all—this is what grown-ups do).**

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and of itself, is a worthwhile and important activity—not merely a means to an end (Wilhelm). As the days passed, it became very easy for me to recognize when a student had chosen a book that wasn't interesting him or her, because that student would stand out as part of the fidgety, clock-watching minority. To remedy these instances, I reminded my students that it's okay

to "abandon" a book if it's not enjoyable (after all—this is what grown-ups do); then I set out to provide them with as many reading options as possible.

Thanks (again) to my excellent Secondary English Teaching program, I began my career with a working knowledge and growing collection of young adult literature (YAL), as well as memberships to The Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (ALAN) and The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). As I observed my students reading each day, I became better and better at recognizing which students appreciated which authors, which authors I needed to add to my book cabinet, which reader demographics I had inadvertently neglected, and so on. Despite these small successes, it didn't take long for me to realize that I was running out of money and my students were running out of books, so I employed the strategies below to foster independent book selection and further development of students' personal preferences.

1. **Book Talks & Passes:** Each time I purchase a small selection of new books, I present enthusiastic book talks followed by a whole-class book pass. During a book pass, every student must have a book in his or her hand; each student gets about 2 minutes to examine the book and record comments about it before passing it up or down the row. I replace some students' worn-out books with my shiny new ones, and other students pass whatever they're currently reading.
2. **Amazon.com:** I took my students to the computer lab for an Amazon.com Wish List tutorial. Each kid set up an account and a wish list (no credit card required), which taps into students' inherent teenage materialism and recasts books as *objects* to actually *covet*. Additionally, once Amazon.com gets an idea of a person's "taste," it will actually make recommendations, which took quite a bit of the burden

off of me to keep track of every student's individual interests.

3. **Public Libraries:** On an LCD projector, I took my students through an Internet tour of the local libraries, showing them how it's possible to find and reserve books in advance. Many of them had never even been to a public library, nor did they realize the wide selection of YA titles that are typically available. Once they saw that titles from authors whose work they'd actually read and liked were available "for free" at the library, they were much more interested in giving it a try.
4. **Parent Contact:** I've found that parents can be very valuable allies in keeping kids reading, so I never hesitate to make a positive phone call when a student has discovered a favorite author. Referring parents to a student's personal Amazon.com wish list is an especially successful strategy; most parents are more than willing to encourage their child's reading by granting this kind of "wish."
5. **Personal Recommendations:** Sometimes, all it takes is handing a book to one of my students and saying, "I think you'll really enjoy this." Students are usually so curious about *why* Ms. Featherston thinks this book will be appealing, they just have to give it a chance.

### Step 3: Maintenance

The following strategies have been instrumental in *keeping* my kids reading from mid-September through the end of this school year.

1. **Patience:** When I first attempted to have my students read at the start of every class, I was met with what bordered on mutiny; however, as the students recognized that I was clearly *not* going to give up on the idea, and their grades were *not* going to survive daily zeroes, even the most stubborn and outspoken ringleaders came around. I'll never forget the day when, in plain view of the entire class, the much-respected Ty refused to put down his book at the end of silent reading, protesting, "I just got to the good part!" From that point onward, I had no trouble convincing anybody that reading can be cool.
2. **More patience:** That said, there will be a few kids who seem to reject every reading option you offer—fiction, nonfiction, fantasy, drama; it all "sucks." I had my share of tough cases this year,

but after a few probing conversations and many admittedly time-consuming one-on-one trips to the school library, I've managed to get every one of my students to read *something* contentedly, whether it be Walter Dean Myers or Viktor E. Frankl. I've learned a great deal about YAL (and plain old literature) in the process, and the more I learn, the easier reader-book matchmaking becomes.

3. **Reading logs:** My students keep reading logs in the back of their English notebooks (right next to the page where they record their Book Pass notes for future reading choices), and I make it a point to check these for a completion grade at least once every two weeks. I don't require them to literally "log" their reading time or pages—just the title, author, genre, and a personal rating for each book that they complete *or* abandon. This helps them to develop a strong understanding of their personal tastes (for instance: they consistently dislike science fiction, or love Laurie Halse Anderson), and also gives each student a sense of accomplishment as the page fills up.
4. **Regular independent reading skills practice and assessments:** Roughly once a week, my students spend an entire class period reading the books they have chosen. As they do this, they are required to complete some type of assignment that reinforces and assesses one or more of the reading strategies I introduced at the start of the year. These allow me to keep tabs on which skills I still need to teach or review, and they remind students that we're not just reading—we're getting *better* at reading. Atwell (*In the Middle; The Reading Zone*), Allen (*Yellow Brick Roads*), Tovani (*I Read It, but I Don't Get It*) and Beers (*When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do*) all provide excellent resources for creating these types of assessments.
5. **Impromptu reading conferences:** Any time I find myself in a personal conversation with one of my

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**I'll never forget the day when, in plain view of the entire class, the much-respected Ty refused to put down his book at the end of silent reading, protesting, "I just got to the good part!"**

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students (in the hall, in the office, a few minutes before or after class), I make it a point to discuss what he or she is reading, as well as how that reading is going. This simple action serves to build our classroom community, highlight concepts I should address in class, and provide students with an informal opportunity to discuss what they are reading on friendly terms. I've found that individualized instruction (such as my often-repeated suggestion for improving vocabulary and, thus, reading ability: choose books that contain at least one unfamiliar word in the first two pages) tends to resonate with a student whereas whole-class reminders are often brushed off or forgotten.

## The Payoff

As I mentioned earlier, I never expected my desperate attempt at an independent reading program to *work*, let alone *change* anything—but in spite of my own skepticism, the outcome has been inspiring.

First, there are the small, individual successes, several of which I've already detailed. One of my often-suspended students, Manny, has actually had his books confiscated several times because he's gotten into the habit of reading under his desk when he's supposed to be taking notes in geometry, biology, or French. While I don't approve of his disrespect for other subjects, I can't help but appreciate just how *engaged* he is with these texts, and I always smile guiltily to myself when another of his books shows up with an angry note in my mailbox.

Two of my most notoriously troublesome students, Anita and Jenny, now burst into my classroom each day chattering excitedly about their latest favorite books. A few weeks ago, Jenny screamed across the class during independent reading time to ask Anita, "Hey, you got the list?" When it materialized, the list was entitled, "Good Books You Have to Read: By Jenny and Anita," and was apparently composed at a sleepover. Jenny had just finished *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (Brashares), and couldn't wait to add it to the list. It's worth mentioning that prior to this year,

neither girl had ever read a book—for school or otherwise.

These types of stories add up to an even bigger payoff—the tiny but real effect this program has had on the school community as a whole. Thanks to the support of our content supervisor, a number of veteran teachers in the English department have embraced young adult literature and independent reading, and have been rejuvenated by the enthusiasm they're finally seeing from previously disaffected students. Teachers of other subjects have approached me to express their amazement at how I've "got the whole school reading, even in the cafeteria." Walking through the halls, I catch students discussing books at their lockers; a glimpse into detention reveals the usual suspects uncharacteristically reading up a storm.

Another unanticipated benefit of this program is an expanded cultural literacy for many of my students. As it turns out, if you can get a kid to like reading through high-interest, accessible YA titles, that same kid might just wander to cultural touchstones such as classic literature, adult bestsellers and contemporary nonfiction. For a surprising list of titles my students have passed around, see the sidebar on p. 11.

Additionally, many of my kids have picked up (on their own!) classics that they previously scorned in middle school, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee), *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Frank), and *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck), and still others that they probably *would* have scorned later on in high school, such as *The Color Purple* (Walker) and *Native Son* (Wright). Of course, I never intended for this to happen, but it provides a nice "Well, actually . . ." when closed-minded skeptics claim that reading YAL deprives our children

of cultural awareness and exposure to canonical texts.

The anecdotal evidence is compelling. For instance, Alex, one of my struggling students, excitedly shared with me how "easy" and "not scary" the state-mandated standardized test seemed this year; it seems that for the first time, he was able to "read all that stuff" he usually couldn't finish. Then there were the choked-up "thank you" voicemails from elated parents whose children were reading for

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**"Hey, you got the list?"**  
**When it materialized, the list was entitled, "Good Books You Have to Read: By Jenny and Anita," and was apparently composed at a sleepover.**

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the first time. But the evidence is not all anecdotal. In fact, I would be remiss if I failed to mention the clearly measurable effects of this experiment: most of my students' instructional reading scores have improved considerably this year, according to computer-normed electronic testing, and several have leapt up five or six grade levels. All of my kids have written records of the books they have read this year, and many of those lists span two notebook pages. Best of all (in my book-loving opinion, at least), if asked, nearly every one of my kids can enthusiastically name his or her favorite author, when at the start of the year, many of them would not have been able to name an author at all.

I want to emphasize that what I implemented this year was far from perfect, and I absolutely expect to improve upon this system in the future; for instance, next year I would like to cultivate stronger connections between writing instruction and the students' reading, and I also plan to implement activities and assessments that will actively expand each student's "range" in terms of genre. What I have done here, however, is to share my "starting point" with others in an effort to save them from repeating my process of trial and error. By all measures, this unlikely YA Lit experiment was a success—one that I hope will inspire those who have felt unsure about the practicality of such a program. If I could make it work as a first-year teacher rumored to be "stuck with the bad kids," anyone can.

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# Hopelessly Devoted:

What *Twilight* Reveals about Love and Obsession

In the fall semester of 2007, I was living every English teacher's dream. My best students, my worst students, my serious students, my most flighty students were absorbed, engrossed, virtually inhaling thick, grown-up-looking books. Every day during our silent reading time, they would turn page after page. When silent reading time ended, I allowed five more minutes, let them linger over that last paragraph while I waited patiently at the front of the class to begin our day's lesson. In one of my honors classes, I counted seven students reading the books that had become a phenomenon. They had intriguing titles: *Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse* (Meyer). Their covers were slick, glossy invitations designed in starkly contrasting black and white and red. One of them even featured nearly glowing hands cradling an apple, just begging a would-be reader to take a bite. I bit.

## The *Twilight* Phenomenon

*Twilight* follows a predictable pattern. A female protagonist, Bella, moves to a new town, Forks, Washington, to live with her father and becomes instantly smitten with the most handsome and most mysterious boy in her new school, Edward. The twist? Edward and his equally beautiful siblings are vampires. When she is alone with Edward for the first time in the sunlight, Bella sees him in his sunlit, glittering glory. At the same time, he reveals his struggle

against the primal desire to kill her, as well as the superhuman speed and strength that would allow him to do so. "Common sense [tells her she] should be terrified," but Bella finds herself "relieved to finally understand" the cause of Edward's mysterious, often aloof behavior toward her (Meyer, *Twilight* 272).

Later in the same chapter, Bella and Edward "declare" themselves to each other (Meyer, *Twilight* 274), and Bella decides that she will give up her humanity to live in Edward's world. Forever. Surprisingly, she never wavers after making this decision. Not only does she refuse to consider any other boy who falls for her (and they all do), but she also withdraws from her father and her new friends in favor of Edward's company. Moreover, Bella doesn't consider the beautiful parts of being human long enough to absorb how gruesome and dark and lonely Edward's existence is.

In investigating the phenomenon of this novel, I framed my reading around the following questions: what is so powerful about this work to my students, especially the girls? What is it about the vampire as

character that is so appealing? What does this series say to the young people who read it? Through study of editorial and reader reviews, analysis of the novels themselves (*Twilight* in particular), and research on vampire mythology and gender roles in adolescent novels, I attempt to make sense of the love affair between my students and these books.

As a high school English

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**I framed my reading around the following questions: what is so powerful about this work to my students, especially the girls?**

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teacher who has witnessed the phenomenal success of the *Twilight* novels in my own classroom and in popular media over the last several years, I recognize how powerful these texts are. My students, like thousands of others all over the country, love them, carry them around for weeks at a time, read them, re-read them. Yet, I worry about their merely absorbing the plot, images, and themes of these texts without taking a critical look. If our students are willing to spend so much time and energy on a novel, whether it is a novel that an adult would have selected for them or not, then we must take their efforts seriously. We cannot expect kids to read with an adult perspective, but we can encourage opportunities for them to question and probe into the characters and narratives that have become the objects of their obsession.

*Twilight* can be read as a novel with a predictable plot that reinforces passivity in young women and aggression in young men. Bella, the quintessential damsel in distress, is more than eager to allow Edward complete control over her safety, and indeed, her future. On the other hand, one can read Edward as a postmodern hero, the literary “bad boy” who reveals what it means to be human in an ironic blurring of the boundaries between good and evil. In this view, *Twilight* is the ultimate morality tale, encouraging abstinence and romance, rather than hasty lust. Either way, *Twilight* complicates the genre of both the vampire narrative and adolescent romance, offering readers a traditional love story on one level and a fresh perspective on relationships on another.

### What Readers and Critics Say

In studying the editorial reviews, I found many critics praising *Twilight* as not only a vampire novel, but “a sweet and innocent love story” in which Bella’s and Edward’s love is “as spiritual as physical although they never have intimate relations” (Blasingame 629). In the *New York Times*’ review of *Eclipse*, Bella is a “relentlessly intense heroine” at the center of a “steamy occult romantic thriller” (Schillinger, para. 2, 11). While the tone of the article is generally ironic, remarking in conversational prose the juxtaposition of the dangerous supernatural world and the superficiality of high school drama, it, like most editorial reviews, ignores the lingering philosophical issues surrounding Bella’s willingness to give up her humanity for an existence as an outlaw and outcast.

Editorial reviewers see this novel as a suspenseful, action-packed page-turner that is sure to capture the attention of readers of all ages. The problem here, though, is that the readers who are the target audience of this book are teenagers—specifically teenage girls. Some reviewers acknowledge the pervasive sensual imagery in the novel, particularly the way that readers are expected to respond to the characters’ “palpable” love “viscerally” (*Booklist* 58). However, in these professional reviews, the most disturbing aspects of Edward’s character are described even as they are tempered with gushing praise for the love story between the two characters. *Publisher’s Weekly* asserts that “the sense of danger inherent in [Bella’s and Edward’s] love, and Edward’s inner struggle [are] the perfect metaphor for the sexual tension that accompanies adolescence” (207). That kind of description would grab the attention of many adolescent readers, even if that love story involves a nearly one-hundred-year-old vampire, a teenage girl, and a relationship based on physical attraction that borders on abuse.

Absent from any reviews of this novel are excerpts from the text that provide vivid descriptions of characters’ moods and emotions that are particularly disturbing, not to mention particularly revealing. Early in *Twilight* Edward asserts his protective power over Bella against her will. In one scene, Bella falls faint at the sight of blood in biology class (insert ironic chuckle here), and Edward insists he drive her home. In Meyer’s prose, Edward is described in superlatives. In this instance, he is “outraged,” “indignant,” and “threatening,” “gripping a fistful of [Bella’s] jacket” and “yanking” her toward him (Meyer, *Twilight* 104-105). Bella, as the first-person narrator, describes herself “staggering,” being “ignored,” and “finally freed” once she relents to Edward’s demands (Meyer, *Twilight* 105). To me, this does not seem like the beginnings of a romantic love affair. Rather, Edward and Bella’s mutual magnetic attraction is based on physical appearance and

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**One can read Edward as a postmodern hero, the literary “bad boy” who reveals what it means to be human in an ironic blurring of the boundaries between good and evil.**

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proximity. When he is near, Bella can only concentrate on his beauty. He, likewise, finds her equally mysterious and fascinating, since she seems immune to his mind-reading powers.

For many readers, this is enough. Edward is so beautiful, so mysterious, so deliciously unattainable that his age (almost 80) and his dietary needs (the blood of living creatures) only makes him that much more appealing to readers. And Bella, who already feels isolated and different from her cell-phone-using, prom-attending peers, would of course be attracted to an equally aloof boy. Perhaps readers long for the freedom Bella enjoys once she falls in love with Edward.

With him, Bella believes she has found her true love and can choose her own path, independent of her parents, her friends, and even her species, but the price she pays for it is a willingness to participate at least to some extent in a traditional version of gender-separated power roles: from the very beginning of their relationship, it is clear that Edward is in control, both physically and emotionally.

Additionally, this novel expects that the reader will accept that the kind of power and passion that emanates from Edward's and Bella's relationship is the only logical progression of their relationship. Still, there is something beautiful about a creature who defies his very nature to remain devoted to a very human relationship. From the Cullens' choice to remain "vegetarian" (they kill animals only) to Edward's continuing sacrifices to cater to Bella's needs, the vampires in this novel seem even more human than their actual human counterparts. Edward *chooses* how he will be—he forges his own path in the absence of any kind of strict morality or adherence to religious dogma.

### **What's Wrong with a Little Obsession?**

Obviously, a guy like Edward can only exist in a dream world, but what does this kind of prevailing dream world reveal about young women in the twenty-first century? In one way, Bella is clumsy,

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**In discussing *Twilight* with some of my female students, I found that many saw nothing surprising or questionable about Bella's and Edward's relationship. It seemed normal to them that a girl would alter almost every area of her life for a boyfriend.**

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goofy, and incomplete until she meets Edward. In that regard, she is a reincarnate from the protagonists in 1950s novels who primped for twenty pages just to attend a dance with the object of their affection. On the other hand, though, Edward is no ordinary boy (he's no ordinary monster, either), and Bella represents a uniquely modern young woman. She arrives in Forks already isolated from humanity. School is irrelevant; she has already learned every lesson presented in the school episodes. Her parents are grossly inadequate; Bella has come to Forks so that her mother can follow her new husband to baseball training camp, and her father can barely cook himself a meal

or wash his own laundry.

Even though many women in my generation were raised in the wake of first-wave feminism in which girls are not relegated to the home and are encouraged to pursue careers and interests independently, plots centering around girls who dream about boys asking them on dates, reciprocating their affection, and eventually living happily ever after are so pervasive in popular narrative that many don't recognize the stereotypes they represent. In discussing *Twilight* with some of my female students, I found that many saw nothing surprising or questionable about Bella's and Edward's relationship. It seemed normal to them that a girl would alter almost every area of her life for a boyfriend. Once we began discussing Bella's complete willingness to succumb to Edward's every mood, some actually did see parallels between this novel and the traditional, predictable romantic plots in other books they have read, and they began to notice (if not yet to question) the use of such a paradigm in literature intended for young women. However, because Edward and Bella's relationship is the stuff of fantasy, not real life, their characters provide opportunity for more than literal interpretation. Encouraging students to situate a novel like *Twilight* within the genres of both young adult literature and vampire tales as a whole can lead to deeper reflection and richer discussion that examines significant symbolism and

metaphoric meaning. In other words, this isn't just an entertaining read.

## The Lure of the Vampire—Then and Now

Vampire narratives intended for young adults reveal issues of humanity, most often sexuality and identity, that mirror some of the problems young adults grapple with today. In *Not Your Mother's Vampire: Vampires in Young Adult Fiction*, Overstreet categorizes notable patterns in vampire fiction, including stories on becoming a vampire, romances with vampires, and the humans involved with vampires.

Overstreet sees Anne Rice's Lestat novels, beginning with *Interview with a Vampire*, as pivotal in the rethinking of the vampire character in popular fiction. These characters are seductive and human, so much so that "far from being repulsed by or afraid of creatures that would previously have been considered monsters, we are drawn to them and may even want to become them" (7). In chronicling the myriad examples of vampire novels, ranging from serious to silly, Overstreet acknowledges that vampires, especially the attractive ones inspired by Anne Rice, may in fact represent "everything that most teenagers are not, but might like to be—fearless, attractive, powerful, cool, independent, unsupervised, and intelligent" (13). Clearly combining good looks, rebellious power, and elusive sexuality can be a path to success in reaching a young adult audience. Vampires are characters who have transcended time and death and who continue an existence in which their every choice is their own (Overstreet). They live outside the boundaries of society and are able to construct their own rules and morality, in the tradition of the dark Byronic hero. Many contemporary vampire characters choose compassion, mercy, and love, even in the face of their unquestionable power over the humans around them. They may be hundreds of years old, yet they are modern men who often protect those human characters who are good to them. *Twilight's* Edward is one such Byronic vampire hero.

## They Did What?!

### Love and Sex in the Vampire World

At first, there is a chance that Bella and Edward's relationship doesn't have to be sexual. It is nice to read about Edward's restraint, and we can feel how painful

it is for him to leave Bella in *New Moon*; he may be determined not to harm her, but he can't protect her from other vampires (even his own "family") or the various dangers associated with his way of life. In this manner, the "*Twilight* series so resonates with girls because it perfectly encapsulates the giddiness and the rapture—and the menace—that inherently accompany romance and sex for them" (Flanagan, para. 16). At first, their relationship is about falling in love and almost innocent sensual exploration. Even holding hands is almost too much, and their first kiss is nearly explosive.

In book four, *Breaking Dawn*, Bella and Edward marry and physically consummate their relationship. Although Edward's desire doesn't kill Bella, and although much of the action happens between the lines, the effects of their sexual encounter are obvious. The room is destroyed, and Bella looks as though she has been beaten black and blue. This is more than just a loss of virginity; it is primal, physical sex that finally occurs after "one thousand pages of foreplay" (Flanagan, para. 15). As *Breaking Dawn* progresses, Bella becomes pregnant, and in a gory, vivid birth scene, she delivers a vampire baby while simultaneously "dying," therefore creating an "acceptable" reason for Edward to change her into a vampire. From that point on, the existence of the vampire becomes the "normal" one in the novel. This seems like a perfect place for a happy ending, but even Bella's new immortality does not resolve all the conflict presented within this novel.

What do these books say to young women and young men who read them? On one hand, Bella's life literally ends when she marries Edward, but ironically, that choice is also her ultimate happiness. She realizes her full potential as a character only when she becomes a vampire; her human awkwardness and introversion morph into superpowers in Edward's

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world. Long before she ever becomes a vampire herself, though, Bella rejects humanity, rushing headlong into marriage with Edward. At his insistence, Bella does wait until she graduates high school and turns 18, but she does so with impatience. She doesn't want to age any further before becoming immortal, as Edward's body is frozen at 17.

### **Bella's Other Options?**

Not only does Bella choose Edward and eternal youth near the beginning of the series, but her character's choice is never really complicated by any other options. The other human characters are unsuitable substitutes for Edward, although they would make most adolescent female protagonists more than adequate boyfriends. These are characters that go to class, ask girls on dates, and hold after-school jobs, characters whose descriptions and actions evoke old-fashioned mores and an idealized time in American life (Flanagan).

As *New Moon* opens, Edward, afraid for Bella because of the very real dangers inherent in being a human among vampires (most especially the dreaded Volturi, a vampiric "royal family" who are at once fascinated by and threatened by Edward's family), seeks to protect her by leaving her. In the aftermath, Bella's friendship with Jacob, a Native American from the Quileute tribe, intensifies. As Bella pines for the missing Edward, she refuses to let herself fall in love with Jacob, but Meyer doesn't allow her heroine any chance to sort through a real love triangle. Instead, Jacob's role becomes more complicated by the revelation that he and some of his Quileute peers can morph back and forth into werewolves at will, no full moon necessary.

Is there any hope for young men whose friends, sisters, girlfriends read these novels? The young human men who become infatuated with Bella, like Mike and Tyler, are likeable, attractive boys with a balance of coolness and awkwardness that most any teenage girl would find adorable. Instead, Bella must choose between two monsters. Though there is potential at this stage for "the characters [to] grow too big for the box they've been placed in, where they become bold and try to deal with their issues," this never happens (Trimboli). There is no moment in any of the four *Twilight* novels in which "Edward . . . fail[s] at something and discover[s] humility" (Trimboli). Edward

barely has to fight Jacob for Bella's affection, and even though Edward and Jacob, as members of enemy monster species, are sworn enemies, even this complication doesn't really pose much of a conflict to Bella.

### **Bella as a New Woman**

By the end of *Breaking Dawn*, in a *deus ex machina* rivaling those of the best Greek tragedies, Jacob's role in Bella's life is secured. Members of the werewolf pack frequently "imprint" on a member of the opposite sex. This person is essentially the werewolf's "soul mate" and one true love. The Quileute men/werewolves remain faithful to the one on whom they have imprinted, devoting themselves to an eternity of love and protection. Jacob has involuntarily imprinted on Renesmee, Bella and Edward's child. The happy ending that Bella finds at the end of *Breaking Dawn* is complex—oddly postmodern yet optimistic, while simultaneously reinforcing traditional gender and social roles. It may not be the ending that readers could or would literally choose, and Bella's choice to follow Edward into his world may not be the ideal choice or the only choice for her character, but it is one that allows this narrative some kind of peaceful closure. The boundaries between good and evil are not totally erased, but they stretch far beyond the human and supernatural communities of Forks.

In the human world, Bella is faced with dichotomies. She, like many young women I teach, feels the pull to choose education and career *or* raising a family. She can stay in Forks *or* she can go to college. She must choose Edward *or* Jacob. Becoming a vampire, though, releases these dichotomies and expands her choices infinitely. Because Jacob has imprinted on Renesmee, he will be a friend in her life forever. Her father has accepted her choice, though under a thinly disguised sham of ignorance. And let's face it, as a member of the practically immortal un-dead, Bella can attend college dozens of times.

If we view Bella in this manner, then maybe her choice, her taking control of her own future, is the compelling component to this series. It's not hard to imagine, by the end of the series, that perhaps Bella has fallen in love so quickly with Edward because he is the gateway to her destiny. She certainly is a better vampire than human, even disguising the painful initiation process in order to spare Edward and his family the distress of watching her suffer. Once trans-

formed, she becomes the most powerful new vampire any of the Cullen family has ever seen. Watching Bella fall in love with the irresistibly beautiful Edward and convincing him to give her the one thing she decides she wants puts a strong female character at the center of two worlds and makes for a powerful reading experience. In this reading, she is innocent and seductive, naïve and clever: a biblical Eve tempting her own fate and Edward's strict morality. No wonder many are insanely jealous of Bella. Not only does she snare the coolest guy in town, but she does so on her own terms. Now that is a powerful story worthy of a popular culture phenomenon.

## Concluding and Continuing

As a comment on contemporary society, "one of the unintended lessons of *Twilight* is that America has gotten so moribund that it's the undead who come through in the clutch while the living go through their daily paces oblivious" (Wolcott 329). Certainly one interpretation of the novel is that in order to find acceptance and an escape from shallow materialism, one must look outside of society and indeed humanity itself.

On the other hand, from a literal perspective, maybe we are on the brink of a major shift in what teenagers expect from their literary counterparts. Though *Twilight* is filled with brooding existentialists, a relatively uncomplicated plot structure, and creepy imagery, it is certainly a departure from much of the other contemporary young adult literature that is currently being marketed to young women (Glenn). Rather than extol the virtues of materialism, alcoholism, and tawdry, pervasive sex, *Twilight* is ultimately about sacrifice. Bella sacrifices her humanity for a "life" that will give her room to define her own identity and realize her own potential. Edward sacrifices his own instincts for a grueling three novels before he can share eternity with his true love. For many young women, there is something powerful in such a romantic narrative, and there is something powerful in this series that young readers have embraced and are showing little signs of abandoning.

If we look beyond the mass-market selling of materialism disguised as literature that we find in many young adult texts, we may see the beginnings of a subtle shift in the messages and possibilities offered to

young people through books. If so, then it is important to encourage students to read this text critically, to explore it in the context of other popular media, and consider its implications beyond entertainment. It is possible that this novel allows for a questioning of assumptions and an expansion of our current understanding of love, young men, young women, and the ways in which we craft stories about them.

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## *Breathing Underwater:* At-Risk Ninth Graders Dive into Literary Analysis

I looked out at the English class before me, a group of 21 ninth graders deemed at-risk, and wondered if I was in over my head. Panic set in, and I reached for my life raft: Alex Flinn’s novel *Breathing Underwater*. I had met Judy Kitchner, their teacher, at a summer workshop where I had modeled teaching literary analysis to secondary students through close reading. The teachers enjoyed identifying all of the literary devices, discussing the effect of those devices, and writing an analysis of the author’s style, but some participants seemed skeptical. One even stated, “I really liked this activity, but I don’t think my ninth graders could do this. This is pretty high level stuff! I’m lucky if I can even get them to read a novel. Literary analysis and average or struggling ninth-grade students? I don’t see it happening!”

I had insisted that as long as teachers scaffolded the analysis activity, students of all levels could write literary analyses. To scaffold, teachers needed to (1) teach literary devices, (2) break analysis into small steps, and (3) allow students to work in groups at first. Not only did I insist all students could conduct literary analysis, I also extended an invitation, “If any of you would like me to introduce your students to literary analysis, I would enjoy the opportunity. All you need to do is to make sure that they know basic literary devices.” I was thrilled that Judy took me up on my offer.

I was pleased because I see too many students, especially stu-

dents in Title I schools, drowning from the fatigue of navigating a school day that offers too little academic rigor. While this is a multifaceted problem, my experiences working in schools and with teachers lead me to believe that there are three main reasons why this is happening. As Kylene Beers poignantly reports in *The Genteel Unteaching of America’s Poor*, there are a number of teachers who have convinced themselves that there is a population of students who cannot withstand the demands of an academically challenging curriculum. These teachers limit their students to recalling and memorizing facts, to filling in blanks, and to working in isolation because they cannot handle the freedom of cooperative learning. “In the end,” writes Beers, “we are left with an education of America’s poor that cannot be seen as anything more than a segregation by intellectual rigor, something every bit as shameful and harmful as segregation by color” (3).

This segregation by intellectual rigor is advanced by the standardization of education. Proponents of accountability systems believe that if a teacher knows what goals to aim for and is equipped with the proper information, the teacher will be confident in his or her ability to increase student performance. To this end, students have been divided into lanes, and teachers have been equipped with a limited number of strategies with which to coach. Mathison and Freeman note that teachers feel that standardized test-

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**I see too many students, especially students in Title I schools, drowning from the fatigue of navigating a school day that offers too little academic rigor.**

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ing drives classroom curriculum; they are compelled to teach to the test. Therefore, according to Grant and Hill, even teachers who want to uphold high academic expectations feel powerless to implement their own professional judgment. This creates an internal conflict between the mandated curriculum as demanded by districts' accountability programs and teachers' own professional diagnosis of what would best serve their students' needs (Webb 5). The consequences of this conflict are that many teachers:

. . . are finding that their feelings about themselves, their students, and their profession are more negative over time. These teachers are susceptible to developing chronic feelings of emotional exhaustion and fatigue, negative attitudes toward their students, and feelings of diminishing job accomplishments . . . . (Wiley 81)

It is this stress over the legitimacy of their professional decisions that causes many teachers to corral their students into the shallow end of Bloom's Taxonomy, despite the fact that research indicates that students need to swim out into the deeper waters of critical thought. It seems that the proponents of accountability want to pool students and force them to compete in a swim meet while research extols an exploratory field trip to the beach. I opted for the latter with Judy's students, firmly believing that if you can swim in the ocean, the pool should pose no challenges.

### **Day 1: Wading into the Water: Introducing the Idea of Literary Analysis**

I took a deep breath and waded in. "We're going to start today with a freewrite. I have an unusual question for you—especially because you all don't know me very well." I heard the usual shuffling for paper, borrowing of writing utensils, annoyed sighs that the guest is actually making them write. "If you were dating someone and that person hit you—just once—would you stay with him or her, or would you end the relationship?"

I knew the question was too electric for students simply to start writing. Comments and questions erupted, and students began talking amongst themselves. Once they had verbally shared comments, they settled down and wrote for five minutes. Seven students reported that they would end the relationship, stating that "If he hits once, he will hit again . . .

he might even kill you." Eight students—all male but one—said they would stay with the person because everyone "deserves a second chance." Four students wrote that it depended upon the situation. Every student wrote and then shared their ideas during the lively post-writing conversation.

Once the conversation ended, I held up the novel and told the class, "The reason I asked the question is because we are going to do an activity that relates to this book—Alex Flinn's *Breathing Underwater*. It is about sixteen-year-old Nick Andreas. To his friends, Nick is one of the coolest guys in school; he's handsome, rich, plays football, drives a convertible 1967 Mustang, and has a beautiful girlfriend named Caitlin. Caitlin knows the real Nick—the Nick whose mom walked out on him when he was five and left him with an abusive, alcoholic father who repeatedly tells Nick he's a loser. As Caitlin and Nick's relationship grows, so does Nick's possessiveness. Nick begins to verbally and physically abuse Caitlin, until one final incident that results in Caitlin's family getting a restraining order against Nick. At the hearing, the judge sentences Nick to a Family Violence class. This book is about Nick's journey because of that class."

The students began to ask if they would get to read the book, and I saw Mrs. Kitchner's surprised look. They were already motivated because the novel centers on young adult characters and young adult issues. I continued to promote interest, "I like this novel because it's just a good story. You pick it up to read and, before you know it, an hour has passed. It's also well written. Flinn is a master at developing character and using language for effect. Finally, I like the novel because as much as I want to dislike the character of Nick, I can't." At this statement, students called out:

"How can you like a guy who hit his girl?"

"He sound like a spoiled rich kid to me."

"No way, man."

I explained, "Although Nick is a bad guy, Alex Flinn makes him a sympathetic character. Halfway through the novel, you realize that you want Nick to

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**I took a deep breath and waded in. "We're going to start today with a freewrite. I have an unusual question for you."**

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be happy and to overcome his past.”

“How can that be?” the students asked.

And that is how the lesson in literary analysis began.

### Reflections on Day 1: The Selection of the Text

The selection of Alex Flinn’s *Breathing Underwater* was purposeful. Research reveals that adolescents are more engaged and motivated to read when they read young adult novels (Ivey and Broaddus 2001; Pflaum and Bishop 2004). Literary analysis is cognitively demanding work; thus, I wanted the students to be heavily engaged with and invested in the story. Furthermore, Burdan (“Walking with Light” 123) recommends that students acquire the knowledge needed for literary analysis through the study of genres with which they are already familiar; and, young adult novels can promote the learning of literary elements and devices (Hipple 2000; Salvner 2000). Flinn’s novel is particularly well-suited to literary analysis because she weaves literary devices seamlessly and effectually into her writing. Prior to selecting *Breathing Underwater* for this activity, I read seven of the ten finalists for the 2009 Heartland Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature, and none of them utilized literary devices as effectively. Additionally, I liked the fact that the protagonist of the novel is male. Judy’s lowest readers in class were males, bearing out what research has proven: schools are failing to meet the literacy needs of boys (Newkirk 2000; Smith and Wilhelm 2002). Finally, in *Classics in the Classroom: Designing Accessible Literature Lessons*, Jago (2004) writes that “good” literature is literature that requires careful study, often guided by a teacher. The work Judy’s students and I did with Flinn’s novel certainly meets this definition.

### Day 2: Collecting Seashells: Identifying Literary Devices

I distributed a copy of four pages from the beginning of *Breathing Underwater* (Figure 1) and read it to the class. They listened with great interest. I then asked the students what their impressions were. They did not like Nick at all, and they felt sorry for Caitlin. “How can you be so certain?” I asked, “You’ve only read four pages of the book!”

They could not tell me why they felt this way, but they knew how they felt. I suggested, “Do you think

it’s the way the book is written that makes you feel so strongly?” They were not buying it. “Think about it—a book is just like a work of art. Authors use techniques to create pictures and feelings. Let’s take a close look at this section of the book to see what Alex Flinn is doing to make us react so strongly to four pages of a book.”

I put an overhead transparency of the first two pages on the projector and read the first page aloud again. Then I guided them in a close reading. (All student names are pseudonyms.)

“In the third paragraph, Nick is ‘remembering a day on the beach’—what’s that called in the writing world when a character remembers back to something?”

“A flashback,” answered Brandon.

“Correct,” I agreed. “Why do you think Alex Flinn chooses to put a flashback in this portion? What does it do for the story, or what is the effect?”

The class looked at me for a few seconds, hoping I would answer my own question. Finally, Breshana offered, “It tell us that Nick and Caitlin used to have a good time together—before he started hitting her.”

“Yeah,” added Elias. “It even says Caitlin was laughing.”

“Man, things went wrong fast,” realized Valeria. “Laughing one month and in court with a restraining order the next.”

I summarized, “That flashback is doing a lot of work, isn’t it? It lets the readers know that at a point not too long ago, Caitlin and Nick were happy together. It gives you some of the background.”

“Let’s take a look at the next paragraph.” I read aloud again, then asked, “Is Flinn doing anything interesting in this paragraph?”

“She is letting us know that Nick’s dad is a hard\*%#!” Felix blurted out. “Sorry, I couldn’t think of any other way to say it. The dude seems mean.”

“Flinn doesn’t say that he’s mean. What makes you think that?” I probed.

“The way he ‘shoves’ Nick,” answered Felix.

“Excellent, Felix. You noticed Flinn’s choice of verb there. She doesn’t use ‘pushes’ or ‘propels’ or ‘forces.’ She uses ‘shoves,’ and that tells us something, doesn’t it? That’s called *diction*, a fancy, literary way of saying “word choice.” In this case, it’s a strong verb. Are there any other good, strong verbs in that paragraph?”

"Restraining order, huh?"  
 "Trouble with his girlfriend." My father shakes his head. "He is sixteen."

① I stare forward, remembering a day on the beach, Caitlin laughing, a white hibiscus in her hair. Was it only a month ago? God, how did we get here?

② My father nudges me onto the escalator, and it bears me up, high above the white-tiled floors and the metal detector, far from the security woman's gaze. We reach the top, and he shoves me through a green door.

③ The courtroom smells like old books and sweat.  
 3a. Brown benches, like church pews, face the witness stand. On the front wall, gold letters read:

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY, FLORIDA  
 WE WHO LABOR HERE SEEK ONLY THE TRUTH.

Fine, if you know what the truth is. Caitlin sits with her mother in the center pew. Dressed in white, her blond hair loose, she looks like something from our mythology book, a nymph, maybe, pursued by a beast.

④ Guess I'm the beast. I pass her.  
 ⑤  
 ⑥ "Why are you doing this, Cat?" I whisper. "I thought we had something special."  
 Caitlin examines her knees, but I can tell her eyes are brimming. "Yeah, Nick. I thought so too."

"Then, why—?"  
 "You know why." She moves to the other side of her mother.

I must stand there a second too long, because my father shoves me forward. I take a seat in the fourth row. He leaves a gap between us, opens his briefcase, and removes a thick folder. Work. I try to catch his eye. "Do you think they'll—?"

His eyes narrow in annoyance. "Nicos, this is important." He gestures at the folder.

I look away. From across the room, I feel Caitlin's mom staring and Caitlin trying not to. So I concentrate, really concentrate, on making my face a mask. I'm good at that. People at school—my ex-friends, even Tom, who used to be my best friend—see me how I want them to: Nick Andreas, sixteen-year-old rich kid, honor student, coolest guy around. All fake. Only Caitlin knew the truth about the warfare with my father. She knew how humiliating it was warming the bench in football all season.

Telling her that stuff was a mistake. It's easier to fake it. When you fake it for sixteen years, it becomes part of you, something you don't think about. Maybe that's why I can hold a smile when the judge—a female judge who's sure to take Caitlin's side—enters and Caitlin takes the witness stand. I grin like an idiot as the bailiff swears Caitlin in and a lawyer in a gray polyester skirt

begins asking her questions.

"State your name," the polyester lawyer says.

①9 "Caitlin Alyssa McCourt."

2D(x6) Polyester points to the paper she's holding. "Is this your statement, Miss McCourt?" Caitlin nods. "You'll have to voice your answers for the record."  
 "Yes."  
 "Is it your testimony you were involved in a relationship with the respondent, Nicholas Andreas?" Yes. "Is he here today?" Yes. "Point him out, please."

②1 Caitlin's finger stretches toward me. I meet her eyes, try to make her remember all the good times. Bad move.

②2 Her tears, brimming before, spill out, unchecked. A tissue is offered. Polyester keeps going.

"What happened December 12?" Polyester asks.  
 I look at the wall, my attention suddenly riveted by a palmetto bug, feelers writhing. I could kill it if I wanted.

②3 "He hit me."  
 The bug slides to the floor.

I don't listen much after that, just watch Caitlin's mouth move. My father plunks a hand on my shoulder, saying something I don't hear. Anyone looking would think he's patting my back, but his fingers claw my skin. Excuse me, Your Honor, but I'm bleeding. Scuse me while I kiss the sky. The lyrics run through my head with all the other suddenly meaningless information. Will this be over if I say it's all true? Deny it? Apologize? Cat's mouth moves until I wonder if she's reciting the alphabet, the Lord's Prayer, the Pledge of Allegiance. No way could she say that much bad stuff about me. But when I tune in a few seconds, I hear her, agreeing with everything Polyester says I did, not explaining, not giving any background, just agreeing. It was a slap, I want to tell them. One slap, when she pushed me way too far. I never beat her up, would never hurt her. I loved her, love her still. Doesn't she remember anything good about us? I do.

Caitlin clutches the tissue like a white flag. She doesn't use it again until Polyester's final question.

"Are you in immediate fear for your safety as a result of your boyfriend's actions?"  
 Caitlin wipes her eyes, but when she speaks, her voice is strong.  
 "Yes. I am."  
 Polyester has no further questions.

Figure 1. This passage is from *Breathing Underwater* by Alex Flinn (pp. 2–5). In this part of the novel, Nick is in court because his girlfriend, Caitlin, has filed a restraining order against him because he hit her. Copyright © 2001 by Alexandra Flinn. Used with permission.

“Well, at the beginning of that part, it says that Nick’s father ‘nudges’ him, but that’s not like a ‘shove,’” Kayla noticed. “A nudge is like a nice shove.”

The class laughed a bit at that statement. “You’re right, Kayla. Why do you think the father’s actions go from nudging to shoving? What happened to make him get angry as he and Nick rode up the escalator?”

“He didn’t get angry; the security guard just can’t see him anymore. He’s all *Mr. Nice Guy* around other people ’cause he don’t want people to know that he

beat his son,” said Abismael, who rarely contributed aloud in class.

I let them know that their discussion was informing my understanding: “That is very perceptive, Abismael. I didn’t even catch that. Once he’s ‘far from the security woman’s gaze,’ he ‘shoves’ Nick. That’s pretty cool, huh? The fact that we can gather that much from the author’s choice to have a character go from nudging to shoving. Because of diction, we can infer—or form opinions—about characters based upon the evidence

given to us by the author. So, who can summarize what we know about Nick’s dad, Mr. Andreas?”

“That he act one way in public and another way in private and that way ain’t nice,” stated Anquineshia with conviction.

Some students were engaged and getting into this close reading. Others were beginning to look a little bored, so I asked, “Do any of you all know people who act one way in public and another way in private?” The students began to share stories, and through this informal conversation, we got to know each other a bit better, helping to promote a positive learning environment and to re-engage those who had pulled back from the conversation. Burdan (“From Making Maps”) cautions that “there is a danger in allowing efferent reading to become the most valued mode of academic reading” (117) by subordinating

it in importance to what Rosenblatt calls “aesthetic reading in which the reader gives attention to the sensations, feeling, and ideas evoked by the work as it is experienced” (33). According to Rosenblatt, truly active reading involves an engagement of the reader intellectually and affectively; both are crucial to transaction with the text.

I continued to read from the text, moving from “the courtroom smells like . . .” to “I pass her.” I paused and asked, “is there anything in this section you’d like to comment on?”

“There are two similes,” Jonathan noted.

“Two similes? Who can point out one of Jonathan’s similes?” I challenged the class.

Alyshia raised her hand, “The courtroom smells like old books and sweat and the benches are like church pews.”

“The courtroom smelling like books and sweat is not a simile,” corrected Scarlet. “A simile is when you compare two unlike things using *like* or *as*. The courtroom is not being compared to books and sweat; it smells like books and sweat.”

“You are right, Scarlet. The ‘benches like church pews’ is definitely a simile, but the courtroom one is not a simile. It’s another type of literary device. Who knows what it’s called?”

“Imagery,” Jessica offered.

“Yes, and to which of the five senses does this imagery relate, Jessica?”

“Smell,” said Jessica, sounding a bit bored.

“Yes, smell, or—if you want to make it sound fancy—you can say *olfactory*. The other five senses are sight, sound, taste, and touch, right? Well, they all have fancier terms. Sight is *visual*, sound is *audial*, and touch is *tactile*. Taste can also be called *gustatory*.”

“Gustatory,” repeated DeMarcus with an announcer’s voice. “I like that one.”

“Yes, gustatory. Fun to say, huh? So in this part of the text, we have an instance of imagery and a simile. What is the effect of the olfactory imagery of the courtroom smelling like old books and sweat?”

“That would not smell good, all musty and sweaty,” said Anquineshia, crinkling up her nose. “Maybe it show how they pack people into courtrooms, so it’s real crowded. And people are all hot and sweaty ’cause they’re nervous.”

“Good, Anquineshia. It certainly doesn’t make

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**The students began to share stories, and through this informal conversation, we got to know each other a bit better, helping to promote a positive learning environment and to re-engage those who had pulled back from the conversation.**

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the courtroom seem like a place you want to be, does it? Now, what about the simile, ‘benches like church pews?’”

Jonathan raised his hand tentatively, “Well, it’s comparing the benches where the people sit in a courtroom to the pews in a church. Maybe that’s because a courtroom is kind of like a church, like a place where you get judged.”

Keona took issue with his statement, “You do not get judged at church, Jonathan. Church is a place to confess your sins and be truthful, not judged.”

I was surprised by the vehemence of her statement and by her posture. Keona had risen from her desk and was pointing angrily at Jonathan. I could tell that this could become a heated discussion, so to avoid a debate about the role of the church, I offered a compromise, “It’s okay if two people don’t see eye to eye on what something means. Remember, we are making inferences, meaning we’re trying to make educated guesses. Often, how we interpret something is going to be influenced by our life experiences. Some people may agree with Jonathan and others with Keona. That’s okay. Courtrooms can be affiliated with both—judgment and truth.”

I read the next section from “Fine, if you know what the truth is” to “Guess I’m the beast. I pass her” (2). Scarlet immediately blurted out, “Oh, there’s a metaphor. Nick compares himself to a beast. ‘I’m the beast.’”

“Good, Scarlet! How does that make you feel about Nick, that he compares himself to a beast?”

“I think it means that he knows what he did was wrong. It reminds me of *Beauty and the Beast*—how the beast doesn’t think he’s good enough for Belle,” said Scarlet, as others nodded their heads in agreement. I was happy that she made a connection to another text.

Before I had time to comment further, Alex asked, “What’s a ‘nymph?’” and I heard some giggling.

I ignored the giggles and said, “Well, in mythology, nymphs were beautiful, young female spirits of nature.”

“So, Nick thinks Caitlin is beautiful because he says she looks like one,” said Alex.

“Yes, he also says she is wearing white and has blond hair. Nymphs are often portrayed as wearing white. Does anyone know what the color white symbolizes?” I asked, feeling uncomfortable because I am

speaking to a class with only three white students.

Shaquille raised his hand for the first time, and responded simply, “Purity.”

“That’s right, Shaquille. That’s why babies getting baptized and little girls getting confirmed and brides getting married wear white—because it means purity and innocence,” I added, relieved. “So, Nick is the beast, and Caitlin is the blond mini-goddess dressed in white. What effect does that pairing have, do you think?”

“It make him seem real bad and her seem real innocent,” DeMarcus said.

“DeMarcus, you are right. A big literary word to describe what Alex Flinn is doing here is called

*juxtaposition*: putting two things close together to draw attention to how different those two things are or how similar they are. Juxtaposition.

“Juxtaposition,” DeMarcus said with a broad smile, and I saw that he was pleased to be “let in on” the secret language of literary analysis and to realize that it is not nearly so mysterious once you learn the process of constructing meaning and the associated terminology with which to describe it.

“Okay, the bell is about to ring on us, so we’re going to stop for the day. Tomorrow, you will be working in groups to identify some of the other literary devices Flinn uses on the next three pages,” I said loudly over the ringing bell and zipping of backpacks.

## Reflection on Day 2: Encouraging Critical Thinking

The importance of Keona and Jonathan’s disagreement about interpretation is significant. Burdan states that many students are reluctant to engage in literary interpretation because “they doubt their authority to speak of the meaning of literature . . . [and] see themselves as observers, rather than participants in “the construction of knowledge” (“Walking with Light” 121).

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**“It’s okay if two people don’t see eye to eye on what something means. Remember, we are making inferences, meaning we’re trying to make educated guesses. Often, how we interpret something is going to be influenced by our life experiences.”**

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Teaching students strategies to unlock literary analysis by identifying literary devices and investigating the effect of those devices enables teachers to promote the reading and interpretation skills students need to construct their own interpretations, thereby “freeing them from passively accepting their teachers’ interpretations” (Rabinowitz and Smith 1998, xv). At the same time, however, this strategy makes clear that it is the reader’s responsibility to attend to the author’s careful crafting of literary signs and to the conventions of the text. In other words, this strategy is a way to make public the thought process of expert readers and to illuminate the steps in the meaning-making process of literary analysis. Students of all abilities deserve the opportunity to think about and write in response to quality literature so they can learn to express their ideas with conviction grounded in a well-developed set of interpretive skills.

### Day 3: Waist Deep with a Buddy: Fostering Cognitive Collaboration

We began the third day by reviewing yesterday’s work. I facilitated this process by putting the first page of Figure 1 on the overhead and giving each student a handout titled “Reading with a Writer’s Eye” (see Figure 2), upon which I had listed the devices the students had discovered and discussed the day before.

I told the students, “You all did a great job yesterday. Today, I am going to put you into small groups and assign each group a portion of the passage. In your groups, continue identifying literary devices and discussing the effects of those devices. You will have twenty minutes to work on this. Then you are going to report, so make sure you record the information; mark it on the passage and write it on the “Reading with a Writer’s Eye” handout. When your group reports out, I want each person in the group to have at least one literary device to discuss.”

To ensure that each group had one student adept in identifying literary devices, I had pre-assigned groups the previous night and written them on an overhead. “Each group has a number that corresponds with the section of the passage I want you to focus on while you work today.” I circulated among groups and answered questions when asked. A few groups found something interesting in their passage, but could not think of a literary term for what they found. I informed the class that not everything had to have a literary term: “You can discuss anything you find interesting. If there is a literary term, I’ll let you know.”

At the twenty-minute mark, I stated, “Time is up. When your group comes up to the projector, underline the part of the passage you’re talking about on the overhead. Tell us what the device is and what the effect of the device is.” I modeled the process before beginning.

Quote	Technique the author is employing	The effect of the technique
“remembering . . .”	<b>flashback</b>	gives us background; shows that Nick loved Caitlin
“nudges” to “shoves”	<b>diction (word choice)</b>	shows true character of father (nice in public, rough in private)
“smells like . . .”	<b>olfactory imagery</b>	paints an image letting us know that the courtroom is not a good place to be. People there are often sweaty due to nerves.
“like church pews . . .”	<b>simile</b>	draws comparison between church and court ( a place of judgment or a place of confession and truth?)
“Dressed in white . . .”	<b>imagery and symbolism</b>	portrays Caitlin as pure and innocent
“looks like . . . nymph . . .”	<b>simile</b>	comparison of Caitlin to a nymph portrays her as pure and innocent
“I’m the beast.”	<b>metaphor and juxtaposition</b>	contrasts Nick’s evil to Caitlin’s innocence; shows Nick’s remorse?

Figure 2. “Reading with a Writer’s Eye”

Group one was assigned the portion of the passage from the spot where we ended yesterday to “He gestures at the folder” (6). The group discussed Flinn’s use of diction, imagery, syntax, dialogue, and the fact that Nick’s father calls him by his Greek name, “Nicos.” Each member in the group presented at least one literary device, naming it, showing where it was in the passage, and discussing the effect of the device. The other four groups presented as well.

All in all, the students found twenty-eight more literary devices in the passage to add to the seven we had found the day before. In the course of discussion, students learned the new terms of *synecdoche* and *allusion*. They also learned that not everything that makes an impact on a reader has to have a “fancy” literary term; sometimes, it is something as simple as syntax or repetition. Figure 3 is a compiled list of all of the devices the students identified.

As student groups presented their findings, class members recorded the information on their handouts. They also asked questions, challenged interpretations, and pointed out some overlooked devices. Students made connections among different parts of the text as well, citing the repetition of the word “fake” and the fact that Nick refers to the attorney as “Polyester” numerous times. They also noted that the negative portrayal of Mr. Andreas continues throughout the passage. Students led the discussion. I was a facilitator and had to interrupt their academic talk because the bell was about to ring.

I asked, “Do you think the judge is going to let Nick off?”

“No!” they said assuredly and almost in unison.

“Why not?” I probed as the bell rang.

“Because he’s ‘the beast,’” said Brandon.

### Reflection on Day 3: Overcoming Learned Helplessness

The “Reading with a Writer’s Eye” handout provided not only a quick way to review, but also allowed the students to see the amount of high-quality work they had done. It also served as a graphic organizer upon which students could record their thought processes, so that they were not reliant upon me in the future. I was attempting to shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach. Applebee (1992) cautions that this type of shift can be disconcerting to students, especially if they have been limited in the

past to “narrowly defined comprehension skills” (9). Sadly, Applebee is alluding to the very same types of classrooms that Beers (2009) addresses in *The Genteel Unteaching of America’s Poor*.

Years of schooling that pose little academic challenge create a sense of learned helplessness in some students. Rarely being asked to share their opinions leads them to have little faith in their own ability to construct meaning and to be generative thinkers. Day three was an attempt to bolster students’ confidence, so they would feel competent to work without my assistance. This approach reflects research reported by Judith Langer (2002) in *Effective Literacy Instruction: Building Successful Reading and Writing Programs*. Langer discovered that effective literacy instruction (1) ensures that students learn procedures for approaching and completing literary tasks; (2) encourages generative learning by engaging students in creative and critical use of their knowledge; and (3) fosters collaborative cognition by having students work in communicative groups and participate in thoughtful academic dialogue where meanings are negotiated and constructed from multiple perspectives.

### Day 4: Venturing into Deeper Waters: Putting the Pieces Together

I gave students the typed-up compilation of their work represented in Figure 3. As the students reviewed the list, I could tell that they were proud of their work.

I was proud of their work, too, and it showed.

“We have done amazing groundwork for the next step. You have done an excellent job taking this passage apart and analyzing the pieces. We are now going to look at it as a whole. Remember when you were finding literary devices, I would not just let you find the device, but

I also asked you to discuss the effect of the device?” Students nodded. “Well, now I want you to look at all of the devices you’ve found and answer this question: what do you think Flinn intended for this passage to

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**If we scaffold literary analysis for our struggling students, they, too, can venture into the deeper waters of critical thought to discover worlds previously unknown to them.**

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***Breathing Underwater* Literary Analysis**

1	“remembering”	<b>flashback</b> —gives us background; shows that Nick loved Caitlin
2	“nudges” to “shoves”	<b>diction (word choice)</b> —shows true character of father (nice in public, rough in private)
3	“smells like”	<b>olfactory imagery</b> —paints an image letting us know that the courtroom is not a good place to be. People there are often sweaty due to nerves
3a	“like church pews”	<b>simile</b> —draws comparison between church and court (a place of judgment or a place of confession and truth?)
4	“Dressed in white”	<b>imagery and symbolism</b> —portrays Caitlin as pure and innocent
5	“looks like . . . nymph”	<b>simile</b> —comparison of Caitlin to a nymph portrays her as pure and innocent
6	“I’m the beast.”	<b>metaphor and juxtaposition</b> —contrasts Nick’s evil to Caitlin’s innocence; shows Nick’s remorse?
7	“shoves”	<b>diction (word choice)</b> —shows true character of father
8	“leaves a gap ”	<b>literal and metaphorical imagery</b> —shows the physical and emotional distance between Nick and his father
9	“Work.”	<b>one word sentence(sentence structure)</b> —draws attention to itself, showing Nick’s dislike of that fact that his father puts work first, even in a situation like this one
10	“Nicos”	<b>Father’s use of full/real name</b> —shows the seriousness of the situation; shows that Nick’s dad does not use the name Nick prefers
11	“this is important”	<b>father’s dialogue</b> —shows father putting work before son
12	“making my face”	<b>metaphor</b> —shows Nick putting on an act and hiding real feelings
13	“All fake.”	<b>sentence structure</b> —draws attention to the fact that Nick pretends to be what he is not
14	“Nick” vs. “Only”	<b>juxtaposition</b> —contrasts the image versus the reality; shows Nick’s trust in Caitlin
15	“fake”	<b>repetition</b> —use of the word “fake” three times shows how hard Nick worked to convince everyone that he was someone else; kept real self hidden
16	“a female judge”	<b>sexism</b> —shows that Nick does not trust females (thinks of mother)
17	“grin like an idiot”	<b>simile</b> —shows Nick continuing his act/fake; shows lack of respect
18	“a lawyer in”	<b>visual imagery</b> —describes the lawyer/Polyester become important
19	“Caitlin Alyssa”	<b>full name</b> —creates atmosphere of seriousness
20	“Polyester”	<b>synecdoche*</b> —Nick refers to the attorney as Polyester six times. Giving her this nickname shows a lack of respect
21	“Caitlin’s finger”	<b>visual imagery</b> —creates a picture in our mind; shows accusation
22	“Her eyes”	<b>visual imagery</b> —creates a picture in our mind; shows Caitlin’s sadness
23	“I could kill”	<b>content mirroring context</b> —Nick hits the bug in anger like he hit Caitlin
24	“I meet” vs. “I don’t”	<b>juxtaposition</b> —Nick was attentive at first, now he zones out
25	“plunks” & “claw”	<b>diction (word choice)</b> —shows true character of father; also “plunks” is <b>onomatopoeia</b>
26	“Anyone would think”	<b>truth versus reality</b> —shows true character of Mr. Andreas
27	“Scuse me”	<b>allusion</b> —to a Jimi Hendrix song about escaping; shows Nick would like to escape
28	“Will this”	<b>repetition of questions</b> —Nick does not accept responsibility; he just wants this to be over
29	“reciting the alphabet”	<b>listing</b> —Nick thinks Caitlin is speaking in rote, not thinking about what she is saying. He associates her with positive thoughts: alphabet (childlike), Prayer (devotion), Pledge (loyalty)
30	whole page to this point	<b>internal monologue</b> —allows the reader to see Nick’s thoughts
31	“It was a slap”	<b>repetition of “slap”</b> —Nick does not see that he’s done anything wrong
32	Clutches	<b>diction</b> —shows Caitlin as being upset
33	“tissue like ”	<b>simile and symbol</b> —compares the tissue to a white flag, the symbol of surrender showing that Caitlin has given up (given up on love? Surrenders to her mother’s desire to press charges?)
34	“C. nods” vs. “C. wipes”	<b>juxtaposition</b> —in the beginning, Caitlin is too scared to speak aloud and nods instead; in the end, she is empowered and speaks with a “strong” voice. Shows Caitlin gaining strength
		<b>*synecdoche</b> —a figure of speech in which a part represents the whole (wheels = car; hand = manual laborer)

**Figure 3.** Student-generated list of literary devices in *Breathing Underwater* (pp. 2–5). Numbers in left column correspond to numbers found in Figure 1.

do for the novel as a whole? Before you start to think about it, though, I'll give you a hint. Usually, an author is working to establish plot or character or setting or conflict. What is Flinn doing here? The best thing about this question is that there is more than one right answer. Discuss this with your shoulder partner for about three minutes before I call on you to share your ideas. When you're thinking and talking, try to complete this sentence: The main purpose of this passage in the novel as a whole is to \_\_\_\_\_."

At the three-minute mark, I asked for volunteers to share their hypotheses. Here are some of their responses.

"The main purpose of the passage in the novel as a whole is to:

- develop the character of Nick as angry and confused.
- show that sometimes life has hard lessons to learn.
- inform the reader of the background of the novel.
- show how Nick's father's mistreatment of him starts a vicious cycle.
- develop the conflict between Nick and his father.

As we discussed their responses, I asked students to explain their assertions, and they supported their ideas with the literary devices they had identified. They justified their answers and expressed them confidently. For instance, the group that stated that the main purpose of the passage was to develop the conflict between Nick and his father cited the following textual support for their assertion: (1) the choices in diction of Mr. Andreas going from "nudging" Nick to "shoving" him; (2) Mr. Andreas literally and figuratively "leav[ing] a gap" between himself and his son; (3) the emphasis of the one-word sentence "Work."; (4) Mr. Andreas calling Nick "Nicos"; (5) Mr. Andreas putting his work above Nick; (6) Mr. Andreas's fingers "claw[ing]" Nick and "plunk[ing]" down on him; and (7) the difference in the way people view Mr. Andreas versus his true character. This is the outline of a highly effective literary analysis from students who had never previously been asked to do literary analysis.

## Conclusion

Studies by both Langer (1995) and Wilhelm (1997) of what good readers do when they read indicate that good readers enter the story world by evoking visual images. Effective readers interact with the text, predicting what will happen next. They develop rela-

tionships with the story's characters, and they make connections between the action and characters in the story with events from other texts and their own lives. They are reflective. Good readers ask analytic evaluation questions about how the story is told, recognizing literary conventions and their significance, as well as the role of the author in the writing of the story and the role of the reader in assigning meaning. Making this interactive, meaning-making process transparent to our students dispels their notions that reading is a passive process and allows them access into the dialectic and dynamic world of transactional reading. If we scaffold literary analysis for our struggling students, they, too, can venture into the deeper waters of critical thought to discover worlds previously unknown to them.

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## Help Shape NCTE Positions by Submitting a Resolution

If you have concerns about issues that affect your teaching or positions you would like to support, and you think NCTE should take a stand, you have an opportunity to be heard! Propose a resolution that may be voted upon and passed at NCTE's Annual Convention. If passed at the Annual Business Meeting for the Board of Directors and Other Members of the Council, proposed resolutions become part of the Council's position/philosophy on questions related to the teaching of English and can assist the Council in developing action programs.

For further details on submitting a resolution, or to see resolutions already passed by Council members, visit the NCTE website (<http://www.ncte.org/positions>) or contact Lori Bianchini at NCTE Headquarters (800-369-6283, ext. 3644; [resolutions@ncte.org](mailto:resolutions@ncte.org)). Resolutions must be postmarked by **October 15, 2009**.

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## Birthing Dialogue:

### Using *The First Part Last* in a Health Class

Applebee argues for a curriculum that emphasizes “ongoing conversations about things that matter, conversations that are themselves embedded within larger traditions of discourse that we have come to value (science, the arts, history, literature, and mathematics, among many others)” (3). Students across disciplines should not just study content but should participate in conversations that create that content. Writing across content areas is reasonably established in schools; I believe we now need to focus on reading across the curriculum, using literature, particularly young adult literature, to encourage the kinds of conversations Applebee calls for. Participating in such conversations, students will not only learn the content but also “the ways of thinking and doing that give that content life and vitality. They will learn to *do* science, for example, not just learn about its history and accomplishments; they will learn to solve problems and take action on their own” (127). I present this classroom study as modest evidence that integrating young adult literature in content area curriculum can raise relevant life issues through which content area teachers can address critical concepts, while also igniting the kind of authentic discussion that should be a more common experience in every classroom.

### Choosing a Novel for Health Class

Every semester, students in my young adult literature class contend that McCormick’s *Sold* would be a perfect fit for a high school Government class, the narrative a backdrop to the study of what government on an international scale can and cannot do to solve

the problem of child sex slavery so indelibly depicted in the novel. They insist Anderson’s *Speak* would be the perfect centerpiece for a junior high sex education unit, especially making explicit to adolescent males how females experience unwanted sexual advances. Their implied challenge: how can we as English teachers get novels like these included in other content area classes? This past year, I took up the gauntlet and brought, as they suggested, Angela Johnson’s *The First Part Last* into a high school Health class.

*The First Part Last* boldly addresses teen pregnancy and parenting. An extraordinary story of a young man who decides to raise the child he fathered, the novel chips away at many stereotypes. Deeply attached to his daughter, Feather, Bobby belies the belief that adolescent males lack the emotional, cognitive, or social programming to care for children. The book also dispels a racial stereotype often portrayed in popular media: young black males do not take responsibility for the children they father. Countering that negative image, Bobby shoulders significant responsibilities, including moving out of New York to find a better place to raise his daughter.

In this study, I hoped to determine whether attitudes about teen pregnancy had changed since I began teaching in 1990 when, to my dismay, I heard males comment on several occasions that if a girl gets

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**Their implied challenge:  
how can we as English  
teachers get novels like  
these included in other  
content area classes?**

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pregnant, she should be the one to deal with the baby. At the time, I could not think of any books—fiction or nonfiction—that might have offered these males an alternative world view, a narrative about how a teenage boy aids the mother during the duration of the pregnancy and in parenting the newborn. *The First Part Last* is a book I wish I'd had available then.

## Surveying Attitudes about Teen Pregnancy

Situated in a small college town with one public high school, the Health class met during the final period each day. Providing students with information on health issues to support analysis of personal and societal health decisions, the curriculum alternates

between two weeks of physical activity and two weeks of classroom study. The class, gender-balanced with seven males and seven females, was spread across the high school's three grade levels. On the first meeting, all but one of the girls

segregated themselves on one side of the class circle and all the boys on the other. In later class meetings, this division added tension to discussions.

In conceiving this two-week unit, the Health teacher, Ms. Barnes, and I predicted that studying *The First Part Last* would change attitudes about teen pregnancy and parenting across genders, so we administered pre-reading and post-reading surveys. To serve as both an anticipation guide for the students and as a marker of student attitudes about pregnancy issues before reading and discussing the novel, we sought and found a student-friendly survey, developed by KQED Youth Media Corps. The pre-reading survey showed agreement across genders on the majority of the statements (see Appendix A) but showed sharp disagreement along gender lines on three particular statements. Almost all the males disagreed with the statement, "Teen mothers are able to take care of their babies well," while the majority of females agreed. On the third statement, "Teen mothers should go to school and take care of their babies at the same time," there was also disagreement between genders. Almost all males disagreed while the majority of females agreed. On the fifth statement, "Teen fathers do not

take care of their babies," there was disagreement between genders. All but one female disagreed with the statement, and all but one male agreed. After the lively conversations (described below) around the issues raised by the novel, however, virtually all males and females disagreed with the statement.

The post-reading survey (see Appendix B) expressed the positive outcomes of the unit. Though there was no difference from the pre-reading survey on seven of the statements, there were major differences on the three mentioned above. More males now agreed that teen mothers could take care of their babies. The total agreement across genders grew from 41% to 75%. On the statement that "Teen mothers should go to school and take care of their babies at the same time," there was also major change, with more males now agreeing. Total agreement rose from 45% to 69%. More students now disagreed with the statement most addressed by the novel—"Teen fathers do not take care of their babies." Perhaps persuaded by Bobby's efforts, more females disagreed, raising the percentage of those who disagreed from 50% to 86%.

## Changing Attitudes about Teen Pregnancy through Authentic Discussion

The novel took five class periods to read; half of each 71-minute class period was devoted to reading and the other half to discussion of characters, events, and issues that were raised by the reading. To generate contributions from every student, I implemented three discussion strategies: an exit slip, a four-corner debate, and a silent discussion.

In an exit slip, students write questions or comments about activities that occurred in class that day and turn them in as they leave. When discussion lagged near the end of the third meeting, I had students write an exit slip about the issues we had discussed. I started discussion for the next class by reading these slips. The four-corner debate is a useful strategy to get all students involved in a discussion. Students are expected to get out of their desks and declare their position on the debate topic, either agreeing with, somewhat agreeing with, somewhat disagreeing with, or disagreeing with the statement. In the four-corner debate during our fourth meeting, students placed themselves in the four corners of the room according to their position on the statement, "Positive

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***The First Part Last* is a book I wish I'd had available then.**

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images of teen pregnancy—in the media/movies, on television shows, associated with coverage of celebrities—will increase teen pregnancy.” One of the goals of the four-corner debate is to persuade other students to agree with your position and move to your corner.

Silent discussions are a particularly effective strategy to ensure all students are “heard.” To promote a variety of responses after finishing the novel, I had students answer questions that revolved around the book; I asked them to draw from previous discussions and to include points that reflected the larger issues addressed in the novel. In addition to answering the questions I posed, I also asked them to comment on what others had written. This was accomplished by circulating student responses around the room and jotting down comments. Each question garnered from four to six written responses.

Ms. Barnes creates a classroom community in which students are comfortable in taking both physical and intellectual risks. From the outset, then, with but a minor complaint or two that class would be held in a classroom rather than the gym, students exhibited a willingness to read this novel in this content area class. Discussions were energetic, exploring diverse topics from multiple points of view. Three threads emerged from the conversations: a rich thread dealing with details and issues from the novel, one about parents and parenting, and another that pulled issues from the book into local and national perspectives. The thickest conversational thread wove through characters and plot, students making personal connections with the characters and measuring their behavior against students’ own experiences and understanding of their culture.

Students are intimately familiar with having their decisions analyzed and critiqued by those in authority—relatives, teachers, administrators—and they brought that experience to bear in vigorously evaluating Bobby’s actions and decisions. Though Bobby was essentially responsible, he made mistakes, such as skipping school, losing track of time, and spray painting a wall. One student, writing in the silent discussion, differentiated between the types of decisions Bobby had to make, concluding that “he has selective decision-making skills. When it comes to his baby, he has good skills, but taking care of himself they aren’t as good. Like the spray painting was a bad idea and he didn’t really think about it.” Another student add-

ed, “I think Bobby made a good decision to keep his baby because it was something he needed to do for himself & as long as he’s being responsible & realistic about it, I don’t see any harm in him keeping it.”

Students respected Bobby’s decision to keep the baby. One wrote, “If I was Nia, there is no way I would ever have an abortion. I wouldn’t put the baby up for adoption and I think Bobby did the right thing.” One particularly electric moment occurred the first day when the only senior (and a female) said, “16-year-olds in Moscow wouldn’t have Bobby’s responsibility.” Her comment constituted a challenge to the males in the room and set the tension between the genders, at least for the day.

One male retorted, “If I had a kid, I’d take care of it.” “You say that now,” another female interjected, “but if you ended up getting someone pregnant, what would you do? Oh, like get an abortion or put it up for adoption where [Bobby] doesn’t even consider putting it out for adoption.” By the end of the novel, students did not question Bobby’s fitness as a father. For all students, as evidenced by the post-reading survey, he countered the stereotype that teenage males are incapable of being responsible parents.

Throughout the reading, students appreciated the stance the novel took on teen parenting. On an exit slip, one girl wrote, “I like how the book avoids stereotypes regarding teen parenthood; it might be generally thought that the father isn’t often involved in the baby’s life, but Bobby is more involved than Nia. I also like how Bobby and Nia’s relationship seems to be portrayed in a positive light, rather than suggesting that it’s something bad or wrong.” I

asked what message or messages the novel had about teen pregnancy, which generated this response: “The story regards teen pregnancy realistically, neither as something terrible nor glamorous. It sends a message of hope that mistakes can be dealt with positively

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**Students are intimately familiar with having their decisions analyzed and critiqued by those in authority—relatives, teachers, administrators—and they brought that experience to bear in vigorously evaluating Bobby’s actions and decisions.**

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and that teenagers can display a lot of maturity.” This comment was reinforced by another student who wrote, “Things can work out, even if it wasn’t what was planned.”

We discussed conversations teens could have with parents about being sexually active and about parenting. On the first day, the necessity for the availability of condoms surfaced. But more relevant for these students was their awareness that Bobby had a strong support structure at home. When asked if they had had candid conversations with their own parents about sex, only 4 in 14 raised their hands. That Bobby’s parents were open with him about sexuality provided evidence for at least one student to conclude that “Bobby’s parents are doing all they can.” Stu-

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**Through the reading of *The First Part Last* and a variety of authentic discussions, this unit encouraged students to critically consider the issues of teen pregnancy and teen parenting.**  
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dents acknowledged that Bobby’s mistakes were his and not the result of neglectful parenting. Students also believed that because his parents did not shy away from frank dialogue (which they saw as a parent’s responsibility), their example helped Bobby accept his own responsibilities as a parent.

Tapping in on a point made early in the unit about generational differences in attitudes concerning teen sexuality, I asked

students how they might approach their own children’s sexual education. Three respondents echoed what Bobby’s parents did in the novel. One wrote, “I will tell them how it is, blunt and unreserved.” Another chimed in, “I would tell them about it and about safe practices.” A third student wrote he would “Tell them if they’re going to do it, do it safely.” Several students also argued that it is especially important to make sure the girl understands the potential consequences, in part because of the drastic changes her body would undergo during pregnancy.

Building on the question above, I asked, “Compared to your parents, how are your views about teen sexuality different or similar?” One student responded, “I think it is indifferent because my parents don’t care and neither do I.” Being sexually active is not a critical

concern in his family. Another wrote that “our views are the same because my parents are pretty realistic about it & they remember what it’s like to be a teenager.” Another concurred with the first: “I think they are similar because we don’t really care and we know it will some day happen.” These parents appear to approach the volatile issue of teen sexuality with the fortitude of Bobby’s parents.

To help students connect with Bobby and Nia, I queried, “When do you know you’re ready to raise a child? How do you prepare?” One student wrote, “You are ready when both people in the relationship are ready, and your home is a place where a child can be raised safely. You can learn to prepare.” The novel showed this class that one can learn how to adjust to ever-changing relationships with one’s unexpected child, with one’s parents, and with one’s community. Throughout the unit, it was clear these adolescents see parents playing an essential role in sex education.

We not only talked in depth about the novel, we positioned its issues in a larger context. The second day’s reading, for example, included a conversation between Bobby and Nia about what to do with the child. In response to this exchange, one senior girl argued that “the girl gets the say, but a guy gets input.” A sophomore boy agreed: “The girl should get the say because she’s going through the work.” We talked about who gets custody in divorces, the class agreeing that currently in divorce courts mothers are favored. We also discussed what input parents have in decisions concerning teen pregnancy and how in some states, parents can deny consent for abortion.

In the four-corner debate on the influence of popular media, the strongest responses came from the somewhat agreeing corner. One girl said, “[The media] makes teen pregnancy look easy and somewhat fun for a teen, which it isn’t.” Another student said media has some affect “because there are dumb people out there and TV is a strong influence.” Yet another argued that “it can have some part to do with it, but there are many other things that can influence a decision.” One girl reasoned that “girls who want attention or love of some sort see people who are pregnant get a lot of attention and think that if they get pregnant they will get that positive attention as well. But that isn’t the only reason for teen pregnancies.” One male somewhat disagreed, arguing that a film such as *Juno* does not glamorize teen pregnancy

so much as it deals with a delicate subject with humor and optimism.

After finishing the novel, I asked students to describe the general attitude about teen sexuality in the United States. One student wrote that “Teen sexuality is accepted by intelligent new wave thinkers rather than ultra-conservative religious fanatics who would rather forcefully shelter their children and don’t provide a fair sense of life knowledge. So, positive for a fair share, but naïve for the rest.” Another student added, “I think it is accepted in the community. I mean even in school they allow gay & lesbian clubs, and I don’t know that many people who aren’t experimenting with the opposite sex. I think people are ok with it, but they are also naïve because they think they won’t get pregnant or get STDs.” Echoing discussion of a parent’s responsibility, another student generalized that “Some people are way overprotective and don’t really let their children know to be safe but then they just sneak off and do it unsafely.” In the whole class discussion that followed the silent discussion, I asked students whether this generalization was true. They provided examples from the community in which unnamed teenagers with strict parents engaged in unsafe sexual acts.

*The First Part Last* illustrated the physical challenges of pregnancy. Still, students wanted to know more. One respondent noted that “it’s usually unplanned & changes your whole life. I would like to know more of the problems that might occur during/ before the actual birth.” Another wrote, “I know it can happen to anyone even if you’re using a condom, and good things don’t always happen but you should make the best of it.” In discussion, the Health teacher emphasized that the Health curriculum prepares students to take care of their own health and, by extension, also take care of a baby’s health in the unexpected event of a pregnancy. When you take care of your own body, Ms. Barnes suggested, you take care of your future children. The Health curriculum is thus designed to help create lifelong healthy lifestyles.

Students had several suggestions on how to make the Sex Ed curriculum more effective. One student argued that “schools should teach about birth control and condoms more, b/c kids are going to do IT no matter what you tell them, so prepare them to be as safe as possible.” One girl commented that the way it is taught isn’t effective, that pictures of genitals

misshapened by an STD do not deter kids. Another argued that curriculum should assume kids are sexually active and go from there. Again and again, this class argued for a proactive, not prohibitive, response to teen sexuality and its consequences.

## Conclusion

Granted, this study draws from a small sample population; the results nevertheless suggest the potential value of this young adult novel—and perhaps of other novels that lend themselves to cross-disciplinary application—in classes other than English. Through the reading of *The First Part Last* and a variety of authentic discussions, this unit encouraged students to critically consider the issues of teen pregnancy and teen parenting. The class explored relevant topics, nudging students to think about what they would do in similar situations, about gender issues, and about the adult-teenager divide that still exists in relation to teen sexuality. One thing is clear: we are not yet communicating in ways that may lead to better decision making for both teenagers and parents.

In planning the unit, the Health teacher and I wondered whether reading a novel in Health class would contribute to or distract from the curriculum. In the end, we were convinced by our meaningful class discussions that *The First Part Last* was a valuable addition to the curriculum. One student agreed, writing that this novel was persuasive “by teaching us through a real person’s or a fake character’s mistakes.”

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## Appendix A

### Pre-reading Survey: Pregnant and Parenting Teens

(Discrepancies between number of respondents and number of students in class are the result of students leaving some questions unmarked.)

Gender: Male = 7                  Female = 7  
Grade: Sophomore = 4; Junior = 8; Senior = 1;  
Unmarked = 1

1. Teen parents intend to get pregnant and have a baby.

Male :   1   Agree                    5   Disagree  
Female :   0   Agree                    6   Disagree

2. Teen mothers are able to take care of their babies well.

Male :   1   Agree                    5   Disagree  
Female :   4   Agree                    2   Disagree

3. Teen mothers should go to school and take care of their babies at the same time.

Male :   1   Agree                    5   Disagree  
Female :   4   Agree                    1   Disagree

4. Parents of teen mothers should help their daughters out.

Male :   5   Agree                    1   Disagree  
Female :   5   Agree                    1   Disagree

5. Teen fathers do not take care of their babies.

Male :   1   Agree                    5   Disagree  
Female :   5   Agree                    1   Disagree

6. Men are older than the teenage girls they get pregnant.

Male :   5   Agree                    2   Disagree  
Female :   3   Agree                    2   Disagree

7. Teen fathers should drop out of school to take care of their babies.

Male :   0   Agree                    6   Disagree  
Female :   0   Agree                    6   Disagree

8. Teen mothers should drop out of school to take care of their babies

Male :   2   Agree                    4   Disagree  
Female :   0   Agree                    6   Disagree

9. Parents of teen mothers should get full custody of their grandchildren.

Male :   0   Agree                    6   Disagree  
Female :   2   Agree                    4   Disagree

10. High schools should provide day care for the children of teen parents.

Male :   3   Agree                    3   Disagree  
Female :   2   Agree                    4   Disagree

From: KQED Youth Media Corps, <http://www.kqed.org/w/ymc/pregnancy/index.html>

## Appendix B

### Post-reading Survey: Pregnant and Parenting Teens

(Discrepancies between number of respondents and number of students in class are the result of students leaving some questions unmarked.)

Gender: Male = 7                  Female = 6  
Grade: Sophomore = 5; Junior = 8; Senior = 1

1\*. Teen parents intend to get pregnant and have a baby.

Male :   2   Agree                    7   Disagree  
Female :   0   Agree                    6   Disagree

2. Teen mothers are able to take care of their babies well.

Male :   4   Agree                    3   Disagree  
Female :   5   Agree                    0   Disagree

3\*. Teen mothers should go to school and take care of their babies at the same time.

Male :   4   Agree                    4   Disagree  
Female :   5   Agree                    0   Disagree

4. Parents of teen mothers should help their daughters out.

Male :   5   Agree                    3   Disagree  
Female :   5   Agree                    1   Disagree

5\*. Teen fathers do not take care of their babies.

Male :   1   Agree                    6   Disagree  
Female :   1   Agree                    6   Disagree

6. Men are older than the teenage girls they get pregnant.

Male :   5   Agree                    2   Disagree  
Female :   2   Agree                    3   Disagree

7. Teen fathers should drop out of school to take care of their babies.

Male :   0   Agree                    7   Disagree  
Female :   0   Agree                    6   Disagree

8. Teen mothers should drop out of school to take care of their babies

Male :   0   Agree                    7   Disagree  
Female :   0   Agree                    5   Disagree

9. Parents of teen mothers should get full custody of their grandchildren.

Male :   0   Agree                    7   Disagree  
Female :   0   Agree                    5   Disagree

10. High schools should provide day care for the children of teen parents.

Male :   3   Agree                    4   Disagree  
Female :   4   Agree                    2   Disagree

\*One respondent marked both agree and disagree for this statement.

## Expanding World Views: Young Adult Literature of New Zealand

In my third year as an undergraduate studying English, I took a young adult literature (YAL) class. I quickly fell in love with the novels on the class reading list and kept my roommate up late one night as I related plotlines and characters. After hearing about three or four of the books, she pointed out that most of the novels starred American teens in American high schools dealing with American issues. I should have known she would have picked up on this point. She was born and raised in New Zealand, moved to the United States at age ten, and has yet to fully assimilate into American culture. She wondered aloud what sort of YA fiction she would have read, had she stayed in New Zealand. In a moment of utter American ethnocentrism, I told her that I guessed New Zealanders probably read YAL produced by American, or perhaps British, writers. After all, I had never read or heard of a YA novel by a New Zealander.

The truth is, my quick response was unsatisfying to both of us. She didn't think that New Zealanders needed to rely on Americans for their literature, and her conviction left me wondering: what literature has been written *by* New Zealanders *for* New Zealanders in the genre of young adult literature?

When a search for critical sources on New Zealand YAL in general yielded little information, I turned to websites from libraries and bookstores in New Zealand. I was surprised to find a rich collection of children's literature and adolescent novels unique to New Zealand, and I started to realize how exciting my discovery was. As an American student focused only on novels from my own country, it seemed I had been missing out on a wider worldview of YAL. Now I had access to a treasure trove of exciting new information.

### Notable Authors

Browsing through websites made it immediately apparent that there were many native New Zealand authors, though I had never heard of any of them in the United States. While many of them are talented and popular in their home country, it was easy to spot those who reappeared as bestsellers and winners of literary prizes.

Undoubtedly, the most significant of these authors is Margaret Mahy. Mahy is a prolific author, and has published picture books, middle-grade novels, and young adult novels. She has won the Esther Glen Award six times and the New Zealand Post Book Award five times, as well as various other prizes and awards. Mahy writes almost exclusively in a New Zealand setting, because it "is the only country I know well enough to write about," said Mahy (teenreads.com). She captures the experience of a young adult by writing about issues important to this age group and by reproducing the particularities of youth on the page. Though she has no teenage relations, she says that she stays in touch with young people and their trends by "reading and listening in," in order to make the dialogue as realistic as possible.

Many of her novels contain an element of the supernatural, including her award-winning novels *The Haunting*, *The Changeover*, and *24 Hours*. Other significant books by Mahy include *The Catalogue of the Universe*, a romance about a nerd falling in love with

<sup>1</sup> Information about authors and their works is from their websites, which are listed in the works cited section, unless otherwise indicated.

## Additional Background on the YA Lit of New Zealand

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### Literary Prizes

LIANZA Children's Book Awards

- Judged by a panel of librarians whose members change each year
- Sponsored by the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA)
- Elsie Locke Award
  - “Given to the book that is considered to be the most distinguished contribution to nonfiction for young adults”
  - Established in 1987
  - Source: “Elsie Locke Award. Christchurch City Libraries. 2 July 2009 < <http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Kids/LiteraryPrizes/ElsieLocke/> >
- Esther Glen Award
  - “Given for the most distinguished contribution to New Zealand literature for children and young adults”
  - Established in 1945
  - Source: “Esther Glen Award.” Christchurch City Libraries. 2 July 2009 < <http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/kids/literaryprizes/estherglen/> >
- Te Kura Pounamu Award
  - Given for the “most distinguished contribution to literature for children and young adults written in Te Reo Māori”
  - Established in 1995
  - Source: “Te Kura Pounamu Award.” Christchurch City Libraries. 2 July 2009. < <http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Kids/LiteraryPrizes/KuraPounamu/> >

*New Zealand Post* Book Awards

- “Reward excellence in children's literature, recognising the best books for children and teenagers published annually in New Zealand”
- Awarded in four categories: Young Adult Fiction, Junior Fiction, Non Fiction, Picture Book; an additional award is given for the Book of the Year, which goes to one of the category winners
- Judging panel changes each year, and usually includes a mix of editors, authors, illustrators, and librarians
- Sponsored by the *New Zealand Post*, supported by Creative New Zealand and Book Tokens (NZ), and administered by Booksellers New Zealand
- Source: Booksellers New Zealand–*The New Zealand Post* Book Awards. 2009. Booksellers New Zealand. 2 July 2009. < [http://www.booksellers.co.nz/nzpb\\_main.htm](http://www.booksellers.co.nz/nzpb_main.htm) >

the pretty, popular girl; *Alchemy*, about a boy who is asked to spy on a classmate who is practicing alchemy secretly; and *Maddigan's Fantasia*, a post-apocalyptic science-fiction novel that was converted into a BBC television series, re-titled *Maddigan's Quest*.

I found Mahy to be a wonderfully original storyteller. Her best novels combine aspects of everyday teenage life with intriguing threads of science fiction and paranormal activity. She also understands the beauty of words, giving her novels a lyrical quality that makes them a thoroughly enjoyable read. Mahy's distinguished contributions to YAL have also led the New Zealand Book Council to create an award in her honor. The Margaret Mahy Medal is given annually for contributions to children's literature and literacy.

Another popular author is Tessa Duder. Though Duder's books span a wide variety of themes, her most famous novels feature fifteen-year-old Alex Archer. The Alex Quartet, as Duder refers to it, is comprised of *Alex*, *Alex in Winter*, *Alex in Rome*, and *Songs for Alex*; the books follow Alex's journey as she trains and competes in the Olympics in Rome and, ultimately, deals with the aftermath of her experiences. The series is internationally acclaimed, and has won three Esther Glen medals and three New Zealand Post Book Awards. As a teenager, Duder was a competitive swimmer herself, and hoped to go to the Olympics. Because of this, her novels ring true both with competitive swimmers and with teens in general.

Another of Duder's novels, *Jellybean*, features a protagonist much like Alex: both girls are passionate about pursuing their dreams. Geraldine, nicknamed Jellybean, has great ambitions of becoming a conductor, but often feels lonely as she struggles to fit into her mother's busy schedule. Both the *Alex* books and *Jellybean* are available in the US, although they are much more popular in New Zealand.

Other than the *Alex* books and *Jellybean*, Duder's novels have not been published outside of New Zealand. These include several stand-alone novels as well as the Tiggie Thompson series, a set of three novels about a girl with body image problems. Duder has also written both picture books and nonfiction for young adults and has compiled several anthologies of short stories.

Another Esther Glen Medal winner is Jack Lasenby. Lasenby grew up in a small rural community called Waharoa, and most of his books feature the

sort of setting he grew up in, full of the bush, farms, and small towns. He is known for telling the truth as he sees it and not pulling any punches. He feels that kids are smart and deserve books of substance. His best-known work is a historical fiction series set during the Depression, comprised of *Dead Man's Head*, *The Waterfall*, and *The Battle of Pook Island*. These comical books describe the adventures of the Seddon Street Gang, a group of boys who live in a small town. However, many of Lasenby's other novels carry a darker tone. For example, *The Lake* describes the adventures of a girl "learning to survive in the bush and, in the process, finding the strength to handle her stepfather's sexual advances," according to New Zealand Book Council's website. Two post-apocalyptic novels set in the future focus on themes of social injustice and inequality.

Though Lasenby is well known and well liked in New Zealand, his books are either unavailable or difficult to find in the United States: some (including *The Lake* and *The Mangrove Summer*, another historical fiction novel) can be ordered through bookstores and websites, but I was unable to locate any of his books at local libraries in my area. His other books, though unavailable in the US, have won many awards in his native country, and continue to be popular among both students and teachers.

While Lasenby, Duder, and Mahy all write almost exclusively for young adults, Maurice Gee is popular with both adult and young adult audiences. Like Lasenby, many of Gee's novels are set in small towns. They feature a wide variety of subjects, ranging from mystery to speculative fiction, but he is best known for capturing some "region and aspect of New Zealand life" in each novel, says the New Zealand Book Council's website. His most recent novel, *Salt*, won the New Zealand Post Book Award's Young Adult Category and has received great popular and critical acclaim. *Salt* takes place in a post-apocalyptic landscape, where

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**I found Mahy to be a wonderfully original storyteller. Her best novels combine aspects of everyday teenage life with intriguing threads of science fiction and paranormal activity.**

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two kids from radically different social spheres have to team up in order to help each other.

Gee's wide range also includes fantasy, science fiction, and thrillers. *Under the Mountain*, about twins who discover they possess hidden powers that will

help them save the world, was later adapted into an 8-part television series in New Zealand. The *O Trilogy*, beginning with *The Halfmen of O*, is an epic fantasy series often compared to *The Lord of the Rings* and is popular among New Zealand teens. *The Fat Man* is a psychological thriller about a man who was bullied as a kid and eventually becomes a bully himself, trying to get payback for the way he was treated as a boy. Though most of Gee's novels feature some kind

of supernatural element and/or a fantastical setting, they are most importantly about people and character. They are also relevant to cultural issues in New Zealand, including the recurring theme of two characters from different cultures that discover how to work together, reflective of the split culture of the Maori and *Pakeha*, or whites.

## Problems with International Publishing

Though these and other talented New Zealand writers for young adults have won great critical acclaim both in New Zealand and abroad, including in England and the United States, few books by New Zealand authors are available in the United States, and none have garnered the same popularity away from the islands. The question is, why?

A likely part of the problem is the vernacular of New Zealand teens. Speaking of her novel *Hot Mail*, wherein two New Zealand teens become friends through a series of emails, Tessa Duder describes the slang of the protagonist: "Dan's voice, particularly, is probably the first time that the written vernacular of a young New Zealand male has been portrayed with

such accuracy." However, British slang is also considerably different from American lingo, and yet publishers have found ways around this problem, usually by "translating" the slang, as publisher Arthur Levine famously did with J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (Nel 261–284).

A more likely problem is the many logistical and cultural differences between New Zealand and the US. Since New Zealand is in the Southern Hemisphere, their seasons are opposite those in the US. Similarly, schools work differently there, running from late January until early December. Laws significant to teens are different there, too. All of this makes writing for young adults more complicated when an author needs to explain differences within the text. Speaking about the difficulty of writing books for an international audience, Mahy explains, "A young adult can get a driving license at the age of 15 in New Zealand, and if I describe a 15-year-old legitimately driving, people in some other countries think I must have made a mistake. Editors then insist that I explain the driving license situation instead of simply taking it for granted. It sometimes makes me more self-conscious about details than I really want to be" (teenreads.com).

Even more difficult to explain to non-New Zealand teens is the cultural identity of the islands. Though New Zealand has much in common with its European cousin, England, and its neighbor, Australia, it has its own identity, influenced by both European and native Maori culture. "Nowadays, New Zealand sees itself as very much part of the Pacific Rim, and I think of myself as part of that culture, too. I want to write for contemporary children who are now far more aware of the Maori culture, partly because it is celebrated and not hidden as it was when I first started to write," explains Mahy (papertigers.com). While New Zealand children grow up in an atmosphere influenced by the Islander heritage, international audiences may have difficulty understanding the unique mix of Maori and British culture.

Additionally, "New Zealand thinks of itself as a rural country," says Mahy (papertigers.com). She and other New Zealand authors, especially the aforementioned Gee and Lasenby, make reference to the small towns and farms that give New Zealand this rural setting in their novels. While some American teens would be able to understand the culture of living in a small town or farm, American readers from big cities

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**While New Zealand children grow up in an atmosphere influenced by the Islander heritage, international audiences may have difficulty understanding the unique mix of Maori and British culture.**

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and even suburbia may struggle with the pastoral setting typical of New Zealand literature, finding them significantly different from the rural life they might see in US television or fiction.

New Zealand YA literature has been largely unrecognized outside of the country itself. However, as young adult readers become more internationally savvy, it is likely the issues that impede the publication of literature from New Zealand, as well as other countries, could dissolve. With the popularity of media (including film, literature, and Internet connectivity) from England, Australia, and New Zealand, American teens are becoming more capable of deciphering the particular speech patterns and cultural idiosyncrasies of other English-speaking countries.

As an American college student with little previous understanding of New Zealand slang or customs, I was rarely confused by the uniquely New Zealand concepts and characteristics. In fact, I found these unfamiliar features made the books even more authentic. I was usually able to figure out unfamiliar phrasing from context, and if necessary, I simply looked up confusing references online. It may take a little more work, but it is possible for students to understand these references.

## Expanding World Views

If these mental blocks to the sometimes-confusing cultural differences could be removed, YAL from New Zealand could become valuable to American teens. Specifically *because* New Zealand literature is attuned to the specific issues, culture, and slang of the region, it could provide a valuable window for American teens interested in learning about a lifestyle and culture that is significantly different from their own.

More and more of these novels are being published in the States, and enhanced global communication and online purchase of international novels continues to make it easier to find books published outside the country. This means that students and teachers with an interest in other cultures and lifestyles can find these gems of literature if they are willing to look for them. With luck, literature from New Zealand will soon join the ranks of ethnic and international books, allowing American teens to expand their worldview even further.

**Nicole Westenskow** graduated from Brigham Young University (BYU) with a bachelors of Arts degree in English in April 2009. In her next to last semester, she took a YAL class just for fun and ended up falling in love with the field. She took a class on writing YA novels and recently attended a conference at BYU on writing for young adults. She now plans to edit or write YA novels as a career.

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"Top 100 New Zealand Children's Books of the 20th Century." Story-Go-Round 2001. Web. 2 March 2009.

### For Further Reading

New Zealand Book Council: a source for a wide variety of literature from New Zealand. Contains author profiles, news,

events, and other information. (<http://www.nzbookcouncil.org.nz/index.html>)

The New Zealand Post Book Awards: archives current and past New Zealand Post Book Award Winners. ([http://www.booksellers.co.nz/nzpb\\_main.htm](http://www.booksellers.co.nz/nzpb_main.htm))

Papertigers.org: contains resources and articles for teachers, parents, librarians and readers of young adult literature, focused on authors and literature from the Pacific Rim and South Asia. (<http://www.papertigers.org/index.html>)

Story-Go-Round: a source for general information about New Zealand literature, run by New Zealand author Lorraine Orman. Contains links to booklists, other websites, and information about award winners. (<http://www.story-go-round.net.nz>)

Storylines: a source for reviews, lists of award winners, recent events, and author profiles exclusively for Children's and Young Adult Literature in New Zealand. (<http://storylines.org.nz>)

Wheeler's Books: an online book resource containing information on books, authors, and libraries in New Zealand. (<http://www.wheelers.co.nz>)

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## CALL for CEL Award for Exemplary Leadership

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Your award nominee submission must include a nomination letter, the nominee's curriculum vitae, and no more than three additional letters of support from various colleagues. Send by **February 1, 2010**, to: Patrick Monahan, 4685 Lakeview Dr., Interlochen, MI 49643; [pjmonahan1@gmail.com](mailto:pjmonahan1@gmail.com) (Subject: CEL Exemplary Leader).

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## “More than Meets the Eye”:

Transformative Intertextuality in Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese*

**E**arly in Gene Luen Yang’s young-adult graphic novel *American Born Chinese*, the protagonist, Jin, responds to an elderly woman’s question about what he wants to be when he grows up by saying that he wants to be a “Transformer.” Since he has one of the eponymous toys with him, he shows her how it can change from a truck to a robot, becoming “more than meets the eye” (28). The older woman, the wife of the Chinese herbalist Jin’s mother is seeing, isn’t impressed. She replies that “It’s easy to become anything you wish . . . so long as you’re willing to forfeit your soul” (29).

While we might recognize this exchange as an allusion to the Faust story, Yang has that in mind and more. Through three parallel storylines, Yang weaves together a complex tale of transformation through three characters: the legendary Chinese Monkey King; an apparently white boy named “Danny,” who annually faces the shame of his visiting cousin, the grotesque Chin-Kee; and Jin himself. All three characters make reckless deals to gain access to previously impenetrable spaces, though the “devil” each bargains with is himself. In its complex intertextuality, Yang’s graphic novel poses challenging interpretive tasks for its young readers, and ultimately forces them to confront their own complicity in the racist stereotypes prevalent in some of the intertexts.

By virtue of its very form, Yang’s graphic novel is intertextual, as it alternates between these three stories, telling first the tale of the Monkey King, then Jin’s story, then Danny’s story, which is framed as a bad TV sitcom, complete with canned laughter. Only at the end do they come together, though there are

clear connections between the stories throughout. In the process, it calls upon its young readers to make sense of the three seemingly disparate storylines, as well as numerous additional texts referenced along the way: Faust, as mentioned above, the classic 16th-century Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, and the Bible, as well as nontraditional “texts,” such as superhero comics and manga, children’s folklore, TV shows, toys, and YouTube. In the ways it combines and conflates traditional and nontraditional allusions in its intertextuality, Yang’s novel levels the playing field between “high” and “low” art, “canonical” and “popular” literature, thus enabling young readers to feel a sense of authority about their interpretive skills.

### The Nature of Intertextuality

Though the general idea of texts “speaking” to and through each other existed long before the term “intertextuality” was coined by Julia Kristeva in her 1980 work *Desire in Language*, Kristeva complicates the notion by positing that the relationships between texts occupy only one “axis” of interpretation; the reader and the text itself occupy another, intersecting axis. The resulting intersections suggest that texts only have meaning in relation to each other and in relation to each reader and each reading. As Roland Barthes argues, “A text is . . . a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations. . . . The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a

way as never to rest on any one of them” (Barthes 146).

Of course, intertextuality can be visual as well as textual. Comics writer and theorist Scott McCloud reinterprets the idea of intertextuality for the art of comics by focusing on the ways in which reading comics requires the reader to fill in and interpret not only the images in panels themselves, but more important, in the spaces *between* panels. For McCloud, that “blank ribbon of paper” (88) between panels

asks us to join in a silent dance of the *seen* and the *unseen*. The *visible* and the *invisible*. This dance is *unique* to comics. No other artform gives so much to its audience while asking so much *from* them as well. This is why I think it’s a mistake to see comics as a mere hybrid of the graphic arts and prose fiction. What happens between these panels is a kind of magic *only* comics can create. (92, emphasis McCloud’s)

McCloud’s argument here suggests that reading “sequential art” may be the earliest form of intertextuality that young readers encounter, in the ways it asks them to make links not only between word and image on a page, but to make meaning—literally—in the margins between panels.

While the commonplace rationale for using graphic novels in the English/language arts classroom is that they appeal to visual learners, McCloud’s work implies that they may hold the power to appeal to aural and kinesthetic learners as well. Even though “comics is a mono-sensory medium [that] relies on only one of the senses [sight] to convey a world of experience,” McCloud argues that the reliance on the visual in the panels themselves forces readers to use their other senses—sound, touch, taste, and smell—in between panels to create the context for the visual (89). McCloud suggests that this means that

Several times on every page the reader is released—like a trapeze artist—into the open air of imagination . . . then caught by the outstretched arms of the ever-present next panel! Caught quickly so as not to let the readers fall into confusion or boredom. But is it possible that closure can be so managed in some cases—that the reader might learn to fly? (90)

Gene Luen Yang himself echoes this idea in his master’s thesis, in which he argues that “comics can

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**American Born Chinese, then, gives us a literal illustration of one way comics can provide a kind of “intermediate step to [the] difficult . . . concept” of intertextuality.**

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serve as an intermediate step to difficult disciplines and concepts” (Yang, “Strengths”). As such, graphic novels have transformative potential to aid multiple kinds of learners to understand and become skillful at the complex tasks of literary interpretation. And Yang’s own *American Born Chinese*, in particular, offers some very concrete and—for young readers immersed in popular culture—very recognizable ways to understand intertextuality, and to see how they can be active participants in making

meaning in a text.

As teachers, we’re well aware of students’ need to understand intertextuality—to be familiar enough with “classic” texts that they can appreciate the ways references to them reappear in other texts, allowing them to understand, for instance, the humor of the unintentional misquotations of Hamlet’s Soliloquy and the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* in Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, or to see how Jane Austen’s *Emma* was adapted to make the film *Clueless*. Such familiarity with traditional texts can even enhance students’ viewing of pop-culture productions that refer to them, such as *The Simpsons* revision of Poe’s “The Raven” in one of their seasonal “Treehouse of Horror” episodes.<sup>1</sup> Teachers recognize that this skill can create a powerful sense of mastery in students, which may, in turn, make them more eager readers of more complicated texts.

*American Born Chinese*, then, gives us a literal illustration of one way comics can provide a kind of “intermediate step to [the] difficult . . . concept” of intertextuality. Specifically, Yang’s graphic novel achieves this by using intertextuality in both traditional and innovative ways. As mentioned above, the novel includes references, both textual and visual, to mythological and Biblical narratives—precisely the kinds of intertexts we hope students will learn to recognize in other texts. However, in my experience teaching *American Born Chinese*, those are the allu-

<sup>1</sup> In fact, “The Raven” was featured in the original “Treehouse of Horror” episode of *The Simpsons* during the show’s second season (in October 1990).



sions students are least likely to recognize and use as tools in their interpretation of the text. Instead, Yang's clever use of *nontraditional* intertexts emerges as the single feature of the novel that students most seem to latch on to and appreciate. Students' experience of "getting" these references introduces them to the thrill that intertextuality can bring, and to the ways in which one's understanding of the previously known

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text can help one interpret the new and less familiar text. And in a larger sense, developing the skill of using the familiar to make sense of the strange is echoed in *American Born Chinese's* primary theme: that of the need to recognize racial stereotypes before being able to dismantle them.

I taught this text to a group of preservice teachers in a recent young adult literature (YAL) course; their responses to it, I think, illustrate the ways

*American Born Chinese* challenges even relatively sophisticated, college-aged readers. This, in turn, suggests that using Yang's graphic novel in the secondary classroom might help students recognize the strengths and weaknesses in their own interpretive abilities and help them make the important jump from being able to recognize and interpret popular-culture allusions in texts to recognizing and interpreting more traditional kinds of allusions. In many ways, in fact, Yang's novel calls on its readers to look more critically at the seemingly trivial references that make up their understanding of Asian American cultures, and in so doing, to see how participating in their transmission may make them complicit in the process of ethnic stereotyping.

### **Types of Intertexts in *American Born Chinese***

Broadly speaking, both the classical and contemporary intertexts in Yang's novel tend to fall into three groups: those that are empowering; those that are disempowering or racist; and those that fall in the large, ambiguous space between the two.

Among the *empowering* intertexts the novel draws on are the Monkey King legend (on the classical side) and "Transformer" toys and superhero comics (on the pop culture side). We are introduced to these intertexts in the interstices between the text's first storyline, that of the Monkey King, and its second, that of Jin's childhood. The first installment of each storyline shows the "hero" having his first experience with racism and internalizing it: The Monkey King is turned away from a dinner party in Heaven because he's a monkey and doesn't wear shoes; when he returns to his kingdom, he notices for the first time the overwhelming smell of monkey fur in his chamber (20). He institutes a new rule that his fellow monkeys must start wearing shoes and then trains himself in the "four disciplines of invulnerability" to cold, fire, drowning, and wounds; he also masters the abilities to shape-shift, turn himself into a giant, and perform other amazing feats. He uses these abilities to wage war on the Ao-Kuang, Dragon King of the Eastern Sea; Lao-Tzu, Patron of Immortality; Yama, the Caretaker of the Underworld; and the Jade Emperor, Ruler of the Celestials, finally declaring himself "The Great Sage, Equal of Heaven." While the epic comic-book battles waged by the Monkey King suggest his physical superiority, it is clear that what he is fighting is his own monkey nature.

Similarly, in the second storyline, Jin's parents move from Chinatown to the suburbs, where Jin for the first time sees himself as others see him: Jin's third-grade teacher tells the class that he's just moved there from China ("San Francisco," Jin corrects), and tells a boy who says that "Chinese people eat dogs" that she's sure that "Jin's family probably stopped doing that sort of thing as soon as they came to the United States" (30–31). Like the Monkey King, Jin suddenly notices the smell of his own fur, metaphorically speaking, and starts working to separate himself from it; he and the "only other Asian in [the] class . . . Suzy Nakamura . . . avoid each other as much as possible" (31), and when another student, Wei-Chen, arrives from Taiwan, Jin notes that "Something made me want to beat him up" (36). However, while he studiously tries to avoid Wei-Chen, eventually they realize they only have each other, and Wei-Chen's Transformer—a monkey/robot figure—opens the door to their ambivalent friendship. Though the Transformer is just a toy in this sequence, its metaphori-

cal significance has already been explained in Jin's encounter with the herbalist's wife. Only later will Jin understand the empowering nature of the Transformer, as we will see.

The *disempowering* intertexts function as a crucial connection between Jin's narrative and the third storyline, that of the seemingly white boy named "Danny." Here, the intertexts are largely from the realms of popular culture and folklore. Eventually, these storylines also reference the more empowering intertexts mentioned before, but for much of the novel, the disempowering intertexts dominate, and thus merit a closer look.

Most crucially, Danny's entire story is framed as a bad sitcom titled "Everyone Ruvs Chin-Kee," a device that both normalizes its representations and calls them into question. At the outset of Danny's story, Danny is on the verge of asking his beautiful blond classmate Melanie for a date when his mother announces the arrival of his cousin Chin-Kee for his annual visit from China. Chin-Kee is, literally, an outsized Chinese stereotype, with his buck teeth, pigtail, fawning mannerisms, and ludicrous dialect. Chin-Kee is straight out of central casting for a bad 1920s "Yellow Peril" film, and his cartoonishness makes him both scary and ludicrous. Melanie is terrified by him, thus ending Danny's chances with her, even though he insists that he's "nothing like him! I don't even know how we're related!" (123). Later we learn that Danny has switched schools every year because of Chin-Kee's disruptive visits, which always seem to occur just as Danny has "made some friends, gotten a handle on [his] schoolwork, even started talking to some of the ladies" (126). As Danny says, by the time Chin-Kee leaves, "[N]o one thinks of me as Danny anymore. I'm Chin-Kee's cousin" (127).

Mirroring Danny's isolation and shame, Jin, Suzy, and Wei-Chen take out their internalized racism on each other in increasingly hurtful ways, even as they are collectively denigrated by racist white students at their school (96). Like Danny, Jin has a crush on a beautiful white girl, Amelia, who in turn seems to be crushing on blond, curly-headed Greg. In one of the most notable and literally graphic instances of intertextuality in the book, Greg's locks look remarkably like a stylized version of Danny's hairdo, thus providing an important link between these two strands of the text. Jin, in turn, becomes convinced that the hair

is key to his success with Amelia, and gets a perm (97–98). However, Suzy and Wei-Chen understand that this cosmetic transformation cannot undo their white classmates' perceptions of them. Like Danny, Jin fails to recognize that while he can disown Chin-Kee, he can't make him disappear.

Both Danny and Jin are damaged by other disempowering intertexts. For example, one of the ways in which Chin-Kee humiliates Danny is by singing Ricky Martin's "She Bangs" atop a table in the school library. I knew the song, but not the allusion: as a student explained in her blog, this was a reference to the infamous audition by William Hung on *American Idol* in 2004, in which he massacred Martin's song. Hung managed to parlay his fifteen minutes of reality-TV fame into an actual record deal, and his *Idol* audition has been viewed over 1.3 million times on YouTube. Documentary filmmaker James Hou claims that Hung "embodies all the stereotypes [Asian Americans] are trying to escape from": that of the "ineffectual Asian-American male,"

"complete with buck teeth, bad hair, and bad accent" (Guillermo, pars 24 and 4). The fact that Hung (and Chin-Kee) sing a song made famous by hip-shaking Ricky Martin compounds the irony, and the joke; as journalist David Ng explains, "When a squad of halter-topped dancers gyrate around [Hung] on national television, the resounding implication of course is that the object of their 'lust' is anything but sexy and desirable" (Ng, par. 1). The result, Ng says, is that such caricatures "make us all feel better about ourselves: men can act more manly," and Asian Americans can distance themselves from Hung and "reinforce [their] own happily assimilated identities" (Ng, par. 4).

However, Yang's novel reveals the self-destructiveness of that sort of thinking. Jin, too, tries to distinguish himself from Wei-Chen by telling him to "stop acting like such an F.O.B." (89), even though in the eyes of some of their white classmates, the two are indistinguishable from each other. Jin finally discovers the truth of this when Greg tells him not to pursue Amanda anymore, realizing that Greg doesn't even

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**The intertexts are largely from the realms of popular culture and folklore.**

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respect his masculinity enough to cushion the blow. Like the Monkey King, Jin's realization generates fantasies of a comic-book-like showdown with Greg, but ultimately Jin's anger is again internalized. Greg delivers the final blow by failing to recognize Jin's homage to his own curly locks. The visual intertext about the hair that the reader got right away is invisible to Greg.

In addition to the film and television intertexts that connect these two parts of the novel, Yang also

includes various forms of traditional children's taunts and rhymes to link them. One instance of this kind of children's folklore occurs when Jin, Wei-Chen, and Suzy are mocked by some white classmates for being "dog eaters" (32), a traditional racist taunt. These same white kids nonchalantly goad them, saying "It's getting a little nippy out here," so they should

check for "gook bumps" (96). Suzy reflects the real damage caused by such casual humor when she tells Jin that "When Timmy called me . . . a chink, I realized . . . deep down inside . . . I kind of feel like that all the time" (187), though the boys never have such a breakthrough moment; they continue to use their pain to hurt each other, until eventually their friendship ends.

The graphic novel revisits this kind of children's folklore in the "Chin-Kee" storyline, but here, it's ostensibly played for laughs inside the bad sitcom-frame of this narrative thread. After some of Chin-Kee's stereotypical antics, Danny catches a couple of white kids making slanty eyes and laughing (121), and in perhaps the text's most irreverent and audacious instances of intertextuality, Chin-Kee reenacts the deplorable childhood rhyme "Me Chinese, me play joke, me go pee-pee in your Coke" (118), literally peeing in the Coke can of the high school's most popular athlete.

Many students in my YAL class told me that they laughed out loud when they read that line, mostly in delighted surprise at their recovered memory of that childhood rhyme, but also out of seeing it presented

literally in the text. I have to admit that the first time I read Yang's graphic novel, I was amused, embarrassed, and shocked to see this bit of children's folklore appear in the text; I remember hearing it on the school playground in early elementary school, and also remember being ashamed to recognize it as a part of my own folk repertoire when I came to the study of children's folklore as an adult.

Yang seems to recognize that this folkloric intertext is lurking somewhere in the recesses of many of his readers' memories and needs to be dredged up and confronted for what it is. While Chin-Kee's enactment of the rhyme is presented humorously, the text frames it more ambiguously; literally, the panel where Chin-Kee tells Danny what he's done to the Coke is framed by the sitcom's canned "ha ha ha" laughter. This visual device encourages the reader to question whether this "joke" merits the laughter that it's getting. By doing so, the text asks us to reflect on the unfunniness of the joke, and to consider the pernicious and lingering effects of seemingly innocuous texts. Of course, the novel takes a risk in recirculating the folk rhyme; it's entirely possible that readers might just think it's a funny reenactment of a bit of children's folklore that they'd forgotten, and recite it afresh. But again, it's the novel's intertextuality that complicates this simplistic reading: by this point, the reader has witnessed Jin, Wei-Chen, and Suzy suffering as the result of other seemingly "innocuous" childhood taunts. In a way, then, Chin-Kee's action can be read not just as another instance of his stereotypically comic antics, but as a potent act of revenge and subversion.

At this point, Yang's disempowering intertexts begin to take on a more complex and empowering function. Far from being incidental to the plot, various characters' rage about these stereotypical references is, in fact, what sets off the denouement of the novel. Chin-Kee's "joke" and subsequent performance of "She Bangs" so enrage Danny that he beats Chin-Kee up. What ensues is yet another pop-culture intertext, as the fight between Danny and Chin-Kee becomes a protracted, comic-book version of a Kung-Fu movie, with Chin-Kee showing his superior skills via the "Kung Pao attack" and the "Happy Family head bonk" (208–209). This goes on for six pages, until Danny lands a lucky punch that knocks Chin-Kee's buck-toothed head off, revealing his true identity as the Monkey King. The Monkey King tells Danny, "Now

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## **What ensues is yet another pop-culture intertext, as the fight between Danny and Chin-Kee becomes a protracted, comic-book version of a Kung-Fu movie.**

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that I've revealed my true form, perhaps it is time to reveal yours" (213), and transforms him back into Jin. Here is where the metaphorical sense of the "Transformers" theme reenters the text: the two characters push and pull each other until they are both elevated into something entirely different and vastly more powerful.

The Monkey King then reveals his relationship to Wei-Chen, and tells Jin that he "would have saved [him]self from five hundred years' imprisonment . . . had I only realized how good it is to be a monkey" (223), thus urging Jin to reconcile with his own identity and with Wei-Chen. The two are eventually reunited, and the final image in the novel shows the two of them apparently in a video together. This, too, was a moment of intertextuality that was lost on me, but again my students recognized it as Yang's comic rendering of a popular YouTube video featuring two Asian teenagers lip-synching to the Backstreet Boys' "I Want It That Way." Remarkably, while the William Hung video has been viewed only about a million times, this one has been viewed over nine million times since it was first posted several years ago, and has garnered more than 21,000 comments in that time.

Why does Yang end with this image? Younger, more astute readers could probably piece together a far more credible interpretation of the connection between this video and the characters of Jin and Wei Chen than I could, since they would be far more familiar with the context in which they first discovered and watched the original video. I can only speculate that, like the William Hung intertext, the YouTube image is supposed to again remind readers of the ways in which they might be complicit in perpetuating racial stereotypes: did they laugh at the original video? Think the performers were geeks, wannabees? And if the two singers are transformed into Jin and Wei-Chen, how do we look at the performance differently? Might we be able to see it as playful, sarcastic, mocking? The ambiguity of the novel's final pop-culture intertext leaves readers on their own to make sense of the allusion—but as a result of having read the rest of the text, those readers have themselves been transformed into more agile and skillful interpreters of literature.

## The Broader Use of Graphic Novels

This essay has explored the implications of one graphic novel's potential to introduce students to the complex concept of intertextuality, while suggesting the ways in which that experience might enable students to think more critically and reflect more deeply on the text. In addition to being a writer of graphic novels, Yang is also a high school computer science teacher and an advocate of using comics of all kinds in the classroom, including classes beyond the language arts classroom. In fact, in an article written for *Language Arts*, Yang explains how he has even used graphic novels to teach algebra. His ability to negotiate the space between comics artists, teachers, scholars, and students makes Yang something of a one-man shuttle-diplomacy operation for new literacies. Consequently, teachers interested in learning more about the potential of comics in the classroom might enjoy perusing Yang's website at <http://www.humblecomics.com/comicsedu>. The site includes an online version of his master's thesis on comics in education, as well as other resources available for teachers interested in integrating this transformative art form into their own classrooms.

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## An Almost Young Adult Literature Study

It all seemed like a good idea at the time. Post-secondary educators engaged in the use and study of young adult literature (i.e., *literature written specifically for adolescents in grades 6 through 12*), particularly at research institutions, continually and consistently share anecdotal evidence that supports the notion that their colleagues, especially those in university English departments, perceive them as having lower professional status than other researchers. We, as such educators, could share some anecdotal evidence of our own.

Worse, our anecdotal experiences are depressingly similar to those voiced by our colleagues who teach young adult literature courses. These instructors commonly cite peers glancing dubiously at the titles in their office libraries and commenting upon their use for remedial or younger children while expressing doubt about research appropriateness. Students in their classes also report negative reactions when others observe the young adult texts they have been assigned to read.

While anecdotal, such experiences are commonplace among young adult literature professionals and widely discussed at their conventions, conferences, and other professional venues. Frankly, this information is chilling; if post-secondary educators and students are demeaned personally and professionally because of their association with young adult literature, how can the field advance? Advancement requires research related to usage, but when post-sec-

ondary educators are denigrated and discouraged from that research and their students are similarly treated, the very activities that would eliminate others' negative perceptions of young adult literature are stunted.

### Why the Negativity?

*Marketing:* Marketing may be one culprit in the widespread perception of young adult literature as “less than” other literature. Bookstores and online booksellers prominently feature displays or advertisements of lower quality titles—gruesome horror titles with lurid, titillating covers, light romances with cloying covers that target younger females. Any browser, in-store or online, could easily be dissuaded or manipulated by flashy displays and miss the many quality works located elsewhere.

*Lack of a consistent definition:* Questionable marketing is only exacerbated by the confusing and varied placement of young adult titles in stores, websites, or libraries: some are located in the children's section; others reside with popular adult literature (e.g.,

Stephen King, Nora Roberts); still others are mixed with older young adult titles that now possess contemporary covers and newer copyrights (e.g., Beverly Cleary's *Jean and Johnny* or Harold Keith's *Rifles for Watie*). A few may even be mixed with canonical classics not originally written for adolescents, such as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Lord of the Flies*, or *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Such inconsistent placements may indicate that those working in the

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**Students in their classes also report negative reactions when others observe the young adult texts they have been assigned to read.**

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field do not share a common definition of young adult literature.

*Standards:* Ironically, what was intended to assure YAL's use and value to secondary classrooms may instead be its downfall: standards. In the NCTE/NCATE [National Council of Teachers of English/National Council for Accreditation of Teachers Education] *Program Standard for Initial Preparation of Teachers of Secondary English Language Arts Grades 7–12* (2003), Standard 3.5 states,

“Candidates demonstrate knowledge of, and uses for, an extensive range of literature”; substandard 3.5.3 adds, “numerous works specifically written for older children and younger adults” (10). Additionally, guidelines for acceptable and target standard assessments, state:

As a result, candidates will know and use a variety of teaching applications for numerous works specifically written for older children and younger adults . . . . (10)

and

As a result, candidates will demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of, and an ability to use, varied teaching applications for numerous works specifically written for older children and younger adults. (10)

While the standard suggests preservice English education majors complete a course focused entirely on young adult literature, there is no guarantee that such courses will be offered or that the students will have the option of using YA literature in their public school classrooms. The fact is, most upper-secondary English teachers are prepared to teach and expected to teach the traditional adult canon. This reality is supported by the strictures and expectations of high-stakes testing, mandated assessment, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, traditional college preparation, and parental pressure.

Canonical classics are heavily represented on required standardized tests for middle school, high school, and post-secondary students alike. If such classical works remain the primary literature focus in preservice coursework and secondary curricula, the use of young adult literature will naturally decline.

## Researching Young Adult Literature

Unfortunately, young adult literature also lacks quantitative research. Of course, *The ALAN Review* and

*SIGNAL* feature numerous articles about young adult literature and specific reviews of novels. Many of these pieces are typically unit plan ideas, author interviews, or title compilations from various genres. Occasionally, *The English Journal*, *Voices from the Middle*, and the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* (and perhaps a few others) carry similar articles. In fact, at the 2009 Commission on English Education's Conference session “Young Adult Literature: Defining the Role of Research,” Hayn reported that in the past ten years, only 27 articles that could be described as peer-reviewed and designated as quantitative or qualitative research have been published in the field.

In Kaplan's 2006 article, “Dissertations on Adolescent Literature:

2000–2005,” he categorizes these research articles by dividing them into two categories: *Dissertations of Young Adult Literature* and *Dissertations about Young Adult Literature*. The first category includes 9 dissertations covering uses of young adult novels in classroom settings; the second refers to 23 dissertations and 1 master's thesis analyzing young adult works as a literary genre. These are promising, but this small number culled from five years of research demonstrates the area's lack of study (51–59).

## Launching a New Study

In order to add to the quantitative research regarding young adult literature and discover its level of use and appreciation among language arts educators from secondary (i.e., middle and high school) levels, three members of the Conference on English Education's (CEE/NCTE) Commission on the Study and Teaching of Adolescent Literature designed a with NCTE's secondary section members. The survey's population, generated from NCTE's membership base, was set at 360. Using Krejcie and Morgan's table, “Determining Sample Size for Research Activities” (607–610), 186 questionnaires were required for validity. Survey respondents were selected from NCTE's master list by using Gay and Airasian's simple random sampling (101–117).

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**. . . guarantee that [courses on YA] will be offered or that the students will have the option of using YA literature in their public school classrooms.**

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The questionnaire was pilot-tested with respondents in three states whose primary teaching responsibility was secondary English/language arts. Respondents reported that the survey took approximately 10–15 minutes to complete and identified various problematic study features, such as unclear, redundant, or off-topic questions. This feedback was applied to the survey.

### Identifying Respondents

Of the 617 mailings, 55 were returned. Of those, three were discarded as incomplete (more than three-fourths of the questions were unanswered), leaving only 52 respondents. This represents a return rate of only .09 percent. The survey showed 12 male respondents and 39 female; some respondents did not answer each question, while others provided multiple answers, so numbers did not always total 52. Forty listed their age as 41+, with 11 at the 21–30 age range.

On the question about teaching experience, results showed 38 respondents had 25+ years, 3 had 6–15, and 10 had five or less. Education levels revealed 17 doctorates, 25 master's degrees, 6 bachelor's degrees. Fifty respondents self-identified primarily as White, one as Black/African American, and two as Hispanic/Latino.

These respondents (numbers in italics) fit the U.S. Census Bureau's (2003; see all three reports) compiled data stating two-thirds of educators are female (39/75%), their average age is 44 (40/77%), and they hold a master's degree (25/48%). The national age group with the most teachers is 40–49 (40/77%), with 50+ coming in second. Whites account for over two million educators (50/96%), compared to some 200,000 Blacks (1/.01%) and 169,000 Hispanics (2/.04%). Other groups comprised less than 0.05 of educators (0/0%).

Respondents identified several teaching responsibilities: some listed “high school language arts” while others cited specific courses, such as 11<sup>th</sup>-grade Composition or 12<sup>th</sup>-grade World Literature. All public school respondents stated they taught “Language Arts,” with Composition the most frequently cited specific course at 21. Six indicated responsibility for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders. Twelve stated they taught 9<sup>th</sup> grade, but did not indicate if they were located as part of a middle school or if they were part of a traditional four-year high school.

Post-secondary respondents also taught various courses, with most also identifying several areas. English Methods was most frequently listed (16), with Adolescent Literature next at 7. Courses were then almost evenly distributed among Reading in the Content Area, Composition, Grammar, and other specialties.

Public school size showed the majority reported student populations of 901+ (25); class sizes were distributed more evenly, with 11 reporting 36+ students per class, 9 for both 29–35 and 21–38, and 10 with 12–20.

Thirty-nine respondents reported having taken no young adult courses in their undergraduate preparation, and 30 having none in graduate programs. Seven had taken one such undergraduate course, while 10 had taken a course at the graduate level. Only 4 had two or more undergraduate courses, and 7 indicated two or more graduate courses. Thirteen stated their young adult literature course was helpful to their teaching of young adult literature, but 16 felt otherwise.

The majority (33) identified reading journals *outside* of language arts, such as *Phi Delta Kappan*, *Education Digest*, or NEA publications. Nineteen cited *The English Journal*, *Language Arts*, and *English Education*, and 6 listed *The ALAN Review*, *College English*, and *Voices from the Middle*. Three other sources were mentioned by one participant: *English Leadership Quarterly*, *Ideas Plus*, and *SIGNAL*. Others included various reading journals, middle grades publications, and/or journals from state affiliates.

As for memberships and convention/conference participation, only 7 held ALAN membership, while 8 stated unfamiliarity with the organization. Twenty had never attended an NCTE convention, 18 had attended five or fewer. As for NCTE presentations, 34 said they had never presented, while 10 had made five or fewer presentations. Thirty-nine had never held an NCTE leadership position, with 7 respondents having held five or fewer such positions. Regarding ALAN workshops, 43 had never attended one, and 9 had attended five or fewer. Fifty had never presented at ALAN, and 51 had never held ALAN leadership.

This is unsurprising; the NCTE and ALAN 2009 websites, respectively, show ALAN's membership at approximately 2000, with some 400 attending its yearly workshop—a small number considering NCTE's 2009 secondary membership of approximately 20,000

and total membership of over 60,000.

State affiliate conferences fared somewhat better, but 23 had never attended one. Sixteen reported attending five or fewer, 9 had attended 6–10, and 6 had attended more than 11. Numbers dropped regarding presenting, with 31 never, 17 five or fewer, and 6 reporting 6–15 times. Numbers were lower still regarding leadership: 42 had held no positions, 14 five or fewer, 3 with 6–10, and only one reported 11–15 positions.

When asked if their affiliates offered young adult literature sessions, responses were mixed as 22 reported yes, 3 no, and 29 did not know. Of sessions regarding young adult literature, 17 regularly attended, and 36 did not. Seven respondents indicated ALAN membership, with 9 having attended five or fewer ALAN Workshops.

### Analyzing Comments

The next survey sections contained both numerical and open-ended questions regarding young adult literature. These questions essentially asked for identical information, but were worded differently and placed throughout the questionnaire. Both the numerical *and* open-ended questions showed strong contradictions. The majority of respondents marked both *yes and* no to identical questions having only slight wording variations.

For example, survey items 35–37 state: *I have been discouraged from using young adult literature in my teaching by colleagues, administrators, and parents*, respectively; 41, 46, and 44 respondents correspondingly reported that they had *not* been discouraged by these groups. However, survey item 47 reads, *I wish my colleagues, administrators, and/or parents would be more accepting of young adult literature*. Although this question essentially summarizes questions 35–37, 32 indicated yes; this might seem contradictory, but might indicate instead that regardless of the support they are receiving, they might desire more support.

A Likert scale of one to five (1 = never, 5 = always) was used to analyze responses to numerical questions. Discarding the 3s and the N/As, results were evaluated by adding the ones and twos together as a category, and then the fours and fives. The first numerical set asked respondents to identify current practices using young adult literature. Twenty-two

stated that young adult literature is incorporated into their curriculum; 17 said it was not; 13 used young adult literature even if absent from curricula; 16 did not use it at all. Twenty-six read these works for pleasure, but 15 did not, and 26 reported their school had a wide variety of titles, with six reporting otherwise.

Numerically, 36 said young adult literature was canonical and should be taught in both high school and middle grades, but in other survey responses, these same 36 respondents gave some surprising answers: 10 said that adult classics were of superior quality, 2 reported never using young adult literature, 13 felt it was best with remedial students and/or in the middle grades, and 1 stated that these works were only suited to suburban or private schools.

Twenty-nine said they had always used young adult literature or had increased their usage, with 35 teaching young adult literature, the majority of which (23) used the unit plan. However, in other numerical and written sets, this same group of 29 stated that young adult literature was used only for independent reading or Silent Sustained Reading (SSR), to complement adult classics, or to fill summer reading lists.

Twenty-nine reported that their school held no events involving young adult authors, though 19 did indicate involvement in such events when responding to the Likert scale items. The open-ended, written comments indicated that 19 respondents acknowledged school-sponsored events featuring young adult authors, with four of these 19 involved in the activities.

Twenty-four stated their student teachers were familiar with young adult literature; 8 disagreed, but indicated in question 43 that they felt student teachers were knowledgeable about these works. This translates to 24 respondents saying both yes and no to student teacher familiarity, 19 reporting a unanimous yes, and 8 a unanimous no. Nineteen felt their colleagues were current regarding young adult literature,

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**This same group of 29 stated that young adult literature was used only for independent reading or Silent Sustained Reading (SSR), to complement adult classics, or to fill summer reading lists.**

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and 11 did not, but elsewhere, 43 said their colleagues were current. In other words, of the 43 respondents who affirmed that their colleagues were current in young adult literature, 30 seemed to contradict that assessment on another question; 11 stated their colleagues were not current regarding young adult literature.

On the plus side, 41 stated they had never been discouraged from using young adult literature by colleagues (5 said they had been), 46 had not been discouraged by administrators (5 had been), 44 had not been discouraged by parents (7 had been), and 38 had not been hampered by censorship issues (6 had been). However, these responses represented, if not

a contradiction, at least a desire for more acceptance, since 34 stated they wished their colleagues, administrators, and parents would be more accepting of young adult literature (7 disagreeing).

The last open-ended question asked whether the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* and increased standards/assessment/accountability affected use of young adult literature.

To paraphrase, 20 indicated no effect, 5 marked N/A, and 16 acknowledged an effect that meant returning to adult classics with less young adult literature, less critical thinking, and fewer creative projects, among others things. Respondents commented that such a return produced students with weaker language arts skills overall due to the increased use of worksheets, quizzes, tests, etc. that are products of such objective-based classrooms. Only one respondent stated *less* use of young adult literature would increase language arts skills.

The final numerical questions asked respondents about their current interests regarding young adult literature. Twenty-five stated they wanted to use it more frequently, 30 were interested in reviewing novels, and 28 wanted to become more professionally active regarding young adult works. However, the largest category of journals regularly read by respondents was *outside* of language arts, with only 7 holding ALAN

membership. Forty-three had never attended an ALAN workshop, and 50+ had never presented at a conference or held ALAN leadership positions. The respondent percentages of those interested in increased young adult literature usage (48%), reviewing (58%), and professional activity (54%) seem high, despite the reported low readership of young adult-themed journals and membership in related professional organizations.

## Reflecting on the Results

What conclusions can be presumed from this admittedly invalid survey? The results echo Jennifer Claiborne's dissertation, "A Survey of High School English Teachers to Determine Their Knowledge, Use, and Attitude Related to Young Adult Literature in the Classroom," which served as the basis for her published 2004 survey of 138 Tennessee educators. She received a respectable return rate of 67%, 73% of whom reported not using young adult literature in their teaching; those who did use it in the classroom favored adolescent works considered canonical by Donelson and Nilsen in *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. Educators showed an awareness of young adult titles, but their most frequently stated reason for not using it in their teaching was that these titles did not exhibit the relevance or quality deemed worthy of classroom study. Respondents who were NCTE members totaled 40%, with only one ALAN member.

Those involved with adolescent literature will have read nothing in this report that is surprising; presumably, most readers, including the authors, have anecdotal evidence mirroring the above. These results and Claiborne's study restate the decades-old research found throughout Dewey, Iannaccone, Silberman, and Lortie, as well as Stigler and Hiebart's 1999 assertion that regardless of their post-secondary education, once novice educators begin teaching, they replicate the practices of those who taught them and those with whom they are teaching (97-101).

Like the results themselves, reasons for the low response rate are doubtless contradictory. Those who feel strongly about an issue usually make themselves heard, but most respondents did not appear to take a stance either way. Were so few returned because those who utilize young adult literature did not feel a survey was necessary? Were teachers too busy to

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**Their most frequently stated reason for not using it in their teaching was that these titles did not exhibit the relevance or quality deemed worthy of classroom study.**

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take time for a mailed survey? Does the result reflect declining professionalism, as evidenced in low organizational membership and professional meeting attendance?

Perhaps the only answer for this low return rate is, “Who knows?” We end with the ubiquitous invitation from most scholarly studies: “More research in this area is needed.” Ubiquitous, yes, but true. We invite, or perhaps *challenge* others to replicate this survey with the hope they will receive a return rate that allows for reliable and valid data regarding secondary and post-secondary educators’ uses of young adult literature. We can assure potential researchers it will seem like a good idea at the time.

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<p><b><i>The Awakening</i></b> (Darkest Powers Book 2) by Kelley Armstrong HarperCollins, 2009, 368 pp., \$17.99</p> <p><i>The Awakening</i>, the second book in Armstrong's Darkest Powers series, begins with Chloe, Derek, Simon, and Tori on the run after their escape from the sinister Edison Group. The four teens each possess a power that the Edison Group wants to control. Chloe talks to ghosts, Derek is a werewolf, and Simon and Tori are sorcerers. In addition to dealing with their powers, the four teens also deal with the usual teen issues—Chloe likes Simon but she also likes Derek. Tori has a crush on Simon and Simon has a crush on Chloe. Derek is oddly protective of Chloe but struggles to show how much he cares. Compounding Derek's teen angst are his developing werewolf powers. The Edison Group tracks the teens to their hiding place, so they split up to escape. After they regroup, they leave the city, heading for an adult who may be able to help.</p> <p>Melanie Hundley Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Becoming Alice: A Memoir</i></b> by Alice Rene iUniverse, 2009, 273 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Ilse (also called Elsie, and eventually, Alice) is the young daughter of a Jewish-Austrian family living in Vienna at the start of World War II. When her family's bank accounts are frozen as Hitler advances across Europe and violence escalates, Ilse and her family escape across Latvia and Russia to Japan, eventually resettling in Portland, Oregon. Ilse's parents struggle to provide for the family, and Ilse must adjust to a world where everything is unfamiliar.</p> <p>Rene captures the inner world of a child caught in the turmoil of war, escape, and refugee life—a voice fraught with confusion, fear, and playfulness. Ilse, embarrassed about her lumpy European sweaters, long braids, and crazy relatives, grows into an insightful young woman determined to forge an independent life. While some of the most famous accounts chronicle the terrors of the Holocaust, Rene's memoir provides a glimpse into the lives of those who escaped.</p> <p>Rachel Bowers Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Bloodhound</i></b> (The Legend of Beka Cooper, Book 2) by Tamora Pierce Random House Books for Young Readers, 2009, 560 pp., \$18.99</p> <p>In this sequel to <i>Terrier</i>, Pierce explores a rougher, less magical side of Tortallan history through the journal of Beka Cooper, junior Dog in the Provost's Guard. Beka's restless tenacity in the hunt runs her afoul of city authorities and criminal leaders alike when she is sent to the neighboring town of Port Caynn to investigate an influx of counterfeit coins that threatens the economic stability of the entire kingdom. Beka must stay focused on her investigation while retaining her cover and navigating her romance with a handsome gambler who may or may not be involved in the counterfeiting ring she is bound, by law and by personal commitment, to sniff out.</p> <p><i>Bloodhound</i> retains the element of fantasy that captivated fans of Pierce's earlier Tortallan legends, but its focus on the coarse realities of city life makes Beka's tale even more relatable to modern readers well-versed in the crime-drama genre.</p> <p>Nicole Barrick Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Bugboy</i></b> by Eric Luper Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 256 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>"Shabby" Jack Walsh is only 15 years old and has just hit the big time in horse racing. The Great Depression has hit everyone and everything except the ponies. People still flock to Saratoga to try and make a buck. Jack just wants to work with the best horses. He's already led a very hard childhood, what with being sent away from his family because they couldn't afford to feed him and his sister. Sleeping in the barns is much better for Jack anyway, he thinks. Bigger trials await Jack, though, when he's tempted to fix the biggest race of his life.</p> <p>Even at the very young age of 15, Jack leads a very adult life and has to make very adult choices. Jack must decide what is more important in the horse business—winning the big race or winning at life.</p> <p>Mary Schmutz Junction City, KS</p>

<p><b><i>The Demon's Lexicon</i></b> by Sarah Rees Brennan     Fantasy/Magic/Family Relationships Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2009, 322 pp., \$17.99     ISBN: 978-1-4169-6379-0</p> <p>Nick and his older brother Alan are demon slayers; they use swords and magic to fight evil and protect their mother, a witch driven mad by magicians. The three of them are constantly on the move as they hunt and are hunted by demons and magicians. Though troubled by his feelings toward his mother, Nick has no doubt about the love and loyalty he feels toward his brother Alan.</p> <p>A brother and sister arrive needing protection from a demon, and Nick and Alan are forced to make difficult and dangerous choices in order to protect them. As they search for the demon attacking the brother and sister, Nick finds out that his beloved brother has been lying to him about their family's past. The circle of magicians closes in on the two sets of siblings, the danger intensifies, and Nick uncovers a secret that could cost them all their lives.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Melanie Hundley Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Everlost</i></b> by Neal Shusterman Simon Pulse, 2007, 394 pp., \$17.99     ISBN: 978-0-689-87238-9</p> <p>Have you ever pondered if that brightness at the end of the tunnel is a light of love or flames? What if, on your way to discovering the truth, you were detoured to a place that was a shadow of our world? "Nick and Allie's lives didn't quite flash before them; there was no time." After colliding on their way to the light, these teenagers are prematurely blasted through the black walls of the tunnel, only to wake nine months later in a familiar, yet foreign land.</p> <p>Tribes of children wander between fear of the soul-stealing monster, McGill, and safety with Mary, Queen of Snots, in the ghost structure of NYC's Twin Towers. Everlost is a place where fortune cookies never lie and standing still means sinking to the Earth's core. Neal Shusterman's harrowing tale explains how regardless of what people believe, the universe has its own ideas.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Justin Garwood Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Geek Charming</i></b> by Robin Palmer     High School/Relationships/Friendship Speak, An Imprint of Penguin Group, 2009, 338 pp., \$7.99     ISBN: 978-0-14-241122-3</p> <p>Dylan Shoenfeld is one of the in-crowd at posh Castle Heights High. Her boyfriend is cool and her friends are oh-so-popular. Dylan leads the school in fun and fashion. Her life changes when she drops her fashionable bag in a fountain and it is rescued by Josh Rowen, a film geek, well outside the popular crowd. Dylan agrees to be the subject of a movie he is making as part of the application process to film school. Dylan finds herself becoming friends with Josh, who moves into Dylan's popular crowd. But Dylan's world comes crashing down when a cut of Josh's film footage shows her as a spoiled, selfish diva.</p> <p>Dylan is faced with tough decisions about her place at Castle Heights High School in this frothy appropriation of the princess and the frog fairytale.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Melanie Hundley Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Giving Up the V</i></b> by Serena Robar     Teen Romance/Friendship Simon Pulse, New York, 2009, 242 pp., \$8.99     ISBN: 978-1-4169-7558-8</p> <p>Spencer Davis has just turned 16 and has passed into the realm of womanhood. At least according to her mother, who marched her into the OB-GYN's office for her first exam. Spencer left with The Pill and an odd feeling that this was not how her birthday was supposed to be. After all, she doesn't feel that anyone in her school is even pill-worthy yet. But then the heavens part and she meets Benjamin Hopkins, who just moved to May Valley High. Mr. Golden has all the potential of being "the one." Is Ben pill worthy? What about her friendship with Alyssa, who adores Ben?</p> <p>Read how Spencer deals with her outward appearance, her loyalty to her friends, and how she deals with Ben. This is a page-turner full of pure high school drama!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Mary Schmutz Junction City, KS</p>

<p><b>Hollywood &amp; Maine</b> by Allison Whittenberg Delacorte Press, 2009, 166 pp., \$15.99</p> <p>It is January 1976 and Charmaine Upshaw's life is perfect. She's beginning a relationship with Raymond, trying to get into modeling, maybe acting, and starting her second semester of ninth grade. Then her Uncle E, the ex-convict, returns, and her family takes him back in, even though he left Philadelphia several months ago and cost her family the \$1,000 they had lent him for bail. Maine finds herself without her own bedroom, on the brink of losing Raymond, and her personal life interfering with classroom discussions.</p> <p>Often humorous and always heartwarming, Whittenberg's follow-up to <i>Sweet Thang</i> captures life in the late 70s from the point of view of a black teenager who lives in a close community and finds herself negotiating with the larger themes in the world—such as redemption, doubt, and acceptance.</p> <p>Jacqueline Bach Baton Rouge, LA</p>	<p><b>If I Grow Up</b> by Todd Strasser Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2009, 222 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>The first word of the book's title is highlighted—as well it should be. Nothing in the Fredrick Douglass Project is guaranteed except poverty, the drug market, and dodging bullets from guns of rival gangsters. No one knows this guarantee better than DeShawn, who must face the tribulations of school life versus gang life and the difficulties of teenage pregnancy while trying not to die on the streets like his mother did.</p> <p>DeShawn knows what happens to those who let the mean streets become their playground, battlefield, and in some cases—their death. She must make a decision: become more involved in school and find that ticket out of Fredrick Douglass or become engulfed in the culture of the gang. The choice is not easy.</p> <p>This book is suitable for 6th graders and up and illustrates how tough life can be and how hard the choices are that must be made . . . or else.</p> <p>Cord McKeithen Baton Rouge, LA</p>
<p><b>King Lear</b> by William Shakespeare Adapted by Richard Appignanesi, Illustrated by Ilya Amulet Books, 2009, 208 pp., \$10.95</p> <p>Setting the story in the same time and milieu of Fenimore Cooper's <i>Leatherstocking Tales</i>, the adaptors of this drama take on the grand task of translating a complex tragedy into the <i>manga</i> (Japanese comic book) format. The alternative setting highlights political dimensions of the story, with Lear being an Iroquois chief who marries his daughters to British dukes and a French king. The adaptors succeed in capturing the frenetic quality of Lear's madness, particularly in the famous storm scene, as well as conveying the emotional range of many characters, chief among them Lear's daughters, Goneril and Regan.</p> <p>This book should please both students and teachers. There are definite action movie features injected into the tragedy, but the original language is preserved throughout, and there are helpful scaffolds, such as full-page, color character descriptions, a plot summary, and a brief biography of Shakespeare.</p> <p>Stergios Botzakis Knoxville, TN</p>	<p><b>The Last Olympian</b> by Rick Riordan Hyperion Books, 2009, 500 pp., \$17.99</p> <p><i>The Last Olympian</i>, the conclusion in the Percy Jackson series, is full of betrayal, romance and humor as it follows ancient Greek gods and mythological creatures through their modern adventures. Percy often narrowly avoids mistakes that could eventually lead to his death; he makes the same kinds of mistakes that many kids make. In this final installment, the Titans have escaped from Tartarus and plan to take over the world, casting humankind into chaos. With the help of centaurs, Cyclops, and hundred-handed ones, Percy and his friends must defeat the Titans and restore power to the Gods at Olympus. Riordan's jokes and puns make ancient Greek mythology accessible to kids of all ages, from Hermes' Delivery Service, a package service relying on the god Hermes' fleet feet, to Auntie M's Lawn Gnome Emporium, where the proprietress can turn you to stone with a single look.</p> <p>Che Pieper Nashville, TN</p>

<p><b><i>The Locked Garden</i></b> by Gloria Whelan HarperCollins, 2009, 168 pp., \$15.99</p> <p>Historical fiction/Family/Mental Illness ISBN: 978-0-06-079094-3</p> <p>In the year 1900, Verna's papa, a well-known psychiatrist, has moved her, her younger sister Carlie, and their stern Aunt Maude to Michigan where he will work in an asylum with mentally ill patients. After losing their mother to typhoid, the girls are hesitant to leave the city, but eager for new adventures in their country home. When Eleanor, one of the patients who has made a remarkable recovery, comes to work for the family, Aunt Maude objects, voicing the prejudices and rumors that abound regarding those who live and work in the asylum.</p> <p>Whelan's descriptions and characterization give the reader a taste of what it was like for those whose mental illness was not treated as an illness in the early 20th century. By choosing an adolescent girl to narrate the story, Whelan allows the reader to approach this topic with innocence, compassion, and kindness.</p> <p>Vicki Sherbert Wakefield, KS</p>	<p><b><i>Much Ado About Nothing</i></b> by William Shakespeare Adapted by Richard Appignanesi, Illustrated by Emma Viecelli Amulet Books, 2009, 208 pp., \$10.95</p> <p>Drama/Graphic Novel ISBN: 978-0-8109-4323-0</p> <p>This book succeeds in translating Shakespeare's romantic comedy into the popular <i>shōjo manga</i> (Japanese girls' romance comic) format. The simultaneous matching up of sisters Beatrice and Hero with friends Benedick and Claudio are presented in accessible and fun ways. The format works well in portraying the back-and-forth repartee of Beatrice and Benedick while also being well suited in playing up the soap-operatic qualities of Don John's villainous machinations.</p> <p>Along with the illustrations, the adaptors preserve the use of Shakespeare's original language, albeit in word balloons. The cartoonish pictures go a long way in carrying the story, but there are also a few other built-in teaching tools, such as the full-color character pages that front the story and two pages at the end of the book that contain a full plot summary as well as a capsule version of Shakespeare's life.</p> <p>Stergios Botzakis Knoxville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Once Dead, Twice Shy</i></b> (Madison Avery, Book 1) by Kim Harrison HarperCollins, 2009, 240 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Fantasy ISBN: 978-0-06-171816-8</p> <p>Finding out your dad arranged for the cute guy you were beginning to like to ask you to the prom is bad. Finding out in the middle of prom is worse. As prom nights go, Madison Avery doesn't think hers could get any worse. She finds out that it can when she flees her prom (and the date her father arranged) and survives a horrible car crash, only to be killed by a guy with a large sword. As she's dying, she grabs the guy's necklace and then wakes up several hours later in the morgue. She meets Barnabas, a light reaper, and he helps her get acclimated to her new life. She rescues souls from dark reapers, battles with timekeepers, and meets angels and seraphs—all the while trying to fit in at high school.</p> <p>Melanie Hundley Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>News from the Dead</i></b> by Mary Hooper Roaring Book Press, 2008, 272 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Historical/True Story ISBN: 978-1-59643-355-7</p> <p>In 1650, a teenage housemaid, Anne Green, was hanged for infanticide; she woke up in her coffin several hours later. This novel is based on Anne Green's case and opens with the line, "It is very dark when I wake." The reader immediately experiences Anne's thoughts and her frantic struggle to figure out where she is and how she got there. Anne's experiences—the sexual abuse at the hands of her employer, her pregnancy, and the trial, are juxtaposed with the narrative from the young surgeon who is attending his first dissection. The young surgeon thinks he sees eye flutters and movement from the "corpse" of the young housemaid and has to convince the other doctors that Anne is, in fact, alive.</p> <p>The author uses historical accounts, pamphlets, and documents from the time period to add to the authenticity of the novel. Some of the original documents are included.</p> <p>Melanie Hundley Nashville, TN</p>

<p><b><i>Out of Left Field: Marlee's Story</i></b> by Barbara L. Clanton Regal Crest Enterprises, LLC, 2009, 172 pp., \$11.99</p> <p>As the Clarksville Cougars softball team prepares for the upcoming season, star-pitcher Marlee McAllister is facing challenges on and off the field. An ambitious athlete but struggling student, Marlee is a pretty typical high school junior trying to find her place in a complicated social world. Marlee's surprising connection to Susie Torres forces her to confront her sexual identity and the implications it has for her friends and team.</p> <p>Well-written and authentic, Clanton's story offers a thoughtful presentation of the struggles of lesbian teens. Her fully developed characters allow the issues of sexuality to be addressed respectfully and without over-simplification. Sexual details are included, but appropriate. <i>Out of Left Field</i> is a compassionate and realistic story suitable for a wide range of student readers.</p> <p>Catherine McTamanev Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Percy Jackson &amp; the Olympians: The Demigod Files</i></b> by Rick Riordan Hypertion Books, 2009, 151 pp., \$12.95</p> <p>This companion book to the series Percy Jackson &amp; The Olympians, set in the modern United States and based on Greek mythology, is set up as a field guide for avid fans. Percy Jackson, the 12-year-old son of Poseidon, continues his adventures with the Olympians in 3 short stories, accompanied by interviews with Camp Half-Blood (hence, the demigod designation) residents, his sidekick Annabeth's trunk, a camp map, plus puzzles and games for those who await the publication of the fifth and final volume in the series.</p> <p>Percy uses his wits, an arsenal of special powers, and his engaging personality to conquer dragons, monsters, and other challenges that lurk in and around 21st century New York City. The clever illustrations and captions add to the fan's appreciation of this clever, action-packed fantasy series and is a must-have for Riordan's many admirers. A preview of the upcoming series closer is included.</p> <p>Judith A. Hayn Little Rock, AR</p>
<p><b><i>The Pharaoh's Secret</i></b> by Marissa Moss Amulet Books, 2009, 320 pp. with 40 illus., \$15.95</p> <p>Talibah means "seeker of truth," and her name frames the plot of this tale of intrigue and adventure set in modern Egypt. Talibah and her younger brother Adom accompany their Egyptologist father on a research field trip. While there, the teen heroine becomes tangled up in a mystery surrounding an unusual queen who ruled as a pharaoh. She seems to be disappearing from the ruins around Luxor along with her high priest protector.</p> <p>Talibah and Adom combine wits and ingenuity to overcome ancient curses, curious relics, near drowning, a poisonous scorpion, and a deadly cobra, along with an evil uncle as they help the female pharaoh resume her place in history. At the same time, the two discover a link with their Egyptian mother, who died mysteriously. The author includes notes that detail her interest in ancient Egypt and the grief of losing a loved one.</p> <p>Judith A. Hayn Little Rock, AR</p>	<p><b><i>The Real Spy's Guide to Becoming a Spy</i></b> by Peter Earnest with Suzanne Harper Abrams Books, 2009, 143 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Calling all readers who have ever dreamed of working in the exotic and clandestine world of international espionage. <i>The Real Spy's Guide to Becoming a Spy</i> is about as authentic as it gets: co-written by Peter Earnest, a former CIA operations officer and founder of the International Spy Museum in Washington DC, this helpful book paints an enticing picture of what it means, and what it takes, to be a spy.</p> <p>Learn the professional lingo, try your hand at cracking codes, and figure out how to spot a bugged phone and hidden cameras.</p> <p>Matthew Lukach Nashville, TN</p>

<p><b><i>The Red Queen's Daughter</i></b> by Jacqueline Kolosov Hyperion, 2009, 432 pp., \$8.99</p> <p>Fantasy ISBN: 978-1-4231-0798-9</p> <p>No one knows for certain what became of Mary Seymour, sole heir of the virtuous Queen Katherine Parr. When author Jacqueline Kolosov pulls her from the shadows of Tudor history, Mary is an orphan with a mysterious past and an uncertain future. Her destiny is revealed by the clairvoyant Lady Strange, Mary's guardian: Mary is to become a white magician, protecting Queen Elizabeth's rule with insight, magic, and, most important, a vow never to sacrifice herself for love.</p> <p>Mary's faithful dog Jack and a host of spirits and spells give her confidence when she is called to duty in Elizabeth's court. Navigating the passion and politics that destroyed her parents proves more challenging than she imagined. Mary protects her character and the crown by realizing that good and evil must coexist in the world for people to find their destiny.</p> <p>Caroline McCoy Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Running for My Life</i></b> by Ann Gonzalez Westside Books, 2009, 238 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>High School/Family/Mental Illness ISBN: 978-1-934813-00-3</p> <p>Ann Gonzalez dedicates <i>Running for My Life</i> "to the many teenagers who are handed unfathomable challenges and who, nevertheless, find their way to freedom." Gonzalez gives us an intimate look into the life of one of these teens with Andrea McKane, a fourteen-year-old girl who, despite the odds, learns to live with courage and strength. In addition to the typical problems of a teenage girl, Andrea must cope with her mother's schizophrenia, a disease that transforms the mother she loves into an abusive stranger. While she longs to cling to the comforts of her stuffed bunny and happy childhood memories of her mother, Andrea must confront the pain of her mother's illness and learn to stand on her own.</p> <p>Gonzalez clearly understands the complex issues of growing up in today's world. <i>Running for My Life</i> provides an example of one teen whose bravery shines as she lives day to day.</p> <p>Lindsey Bollinger Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Seattle Blues</i></b> by Michael Wenberg Westside Books, 2009, 236 pp., \$12.99</p> <p>Family Relationships/War ISBN: 978-1-934813-04-1</p> <p>It's 1970 and thirteen-year-old Maya is a kid sorting a lot out on her own. Sent by her mother to live with her grandmother, Maya wants to know why she had to leave the life she knew, a life made even more challenging when her father goes missing in Vietnam. At first angry and sullen, Maya wants to rebel against her grandmother, until she discovers a part of her family's history that she'd never known before, and she realizes that she has a lot to learn from both her mother and grandmother.</p> <p>Well-intentioned, <i>Seattle Blues</i> is weakened by an inconsistent writing style and an underdeveloped voice for Maya. The many challenges that Maya faces, from race riots to autism, seem forced, making the narrative cumbersome. This novel is best recommended for students who are already interested in the story's emphasis on the redeeming power of music.</p> <p>Catherine McTammany Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>The Sorta Sisters</i></b> by Adrian Fogelin Peachtree, 2007, 279 pp., \$15.95</p> <p>Relationships./Families ISBN: 978-1-56145-424-2</p> <p>Two girls, two worlds, but so much in common. Mica lives on a houseboat in southern Florida with a marine scientist father, and Anna lives in northern Florida with a foster mom who is a science teacher. Both girls love science and are hoping to find a true friend. They become pen pals and share much of their lives. Each letter includes a token from nature that they think is interesting. Their friendship brings both girls joy and sorrow, but we see the girls' lives change as time passes. Life does not always have perfect answers, but it can provide challenges and resolution. Students can identify with so many aspects of this book—dysfunctional families, alcoholism, loneliness, friendship, and rejection. This book will find many eager readers.</p> <p>Joy Frerichs Chatsworth, GA</p>

<p><b>Squiggle</b> by B.B. Wurge Leapfrog Press, 2009, 152 pp., \$9.95</p> <p>Family/Friendship/Self-discovery ISBN: 978-0-9815148-9-5</p> <p>When nine-year-old Lobelia Squagg's once-in-a-lifetime shot at a moment of magic goes awry, her soul ends up stuck in a toy stuffed monkey. No longer a TV-watching, soda-drinking, chip-eating, rude, and spoiled little girl, Lobelia must figure out how to survive as a walking, talking, soft-speaking, fuzzy monkey named Squiggle. With the help of kind (and quirky) friends—including the magical “pickfloo,” whose potion first turned Lobelia into a monkey, Squiggle discovers what matters most and travels from New York to France and back to reunite her family and become a polite and happy little girl.</p> <p>B.B. Wurge manages to balance the absurd and the familiar in this strange tale: even in the context of eyeball traders and a land-roaming pet octopus, connections to the real world are never far off. This delightful, hilarious, and wacky story brings together a cast of oddball characters for a page-turning adventure.</p> <p>Nate Phillips Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b>Struts and Frets</b> by Jon Skovron Amulet Books: An imprint of Abrams, 2009, 304 pp., \$16.95 ISBN: 978-0-8109-4174-8</p> <p>Friendship/Self-discovery/Music</p> <p>For Sammy Bojar, it's not about fame; it's about the music. He doesn't want to front a band that makes it big. He just wants to be part of a band that makes great music. But making great music while kicking off a more-than-friends relationship with his longtime best friend Jennifer, worrying about his grandfather's deteriorating sanity, and trying to keep his other friendships intact can get complicated.</p> <p>I can't imagine a title that better describes both the music at the heart of this novel as well as what it is to be a vulnerable, hopeful, and talented young musician than <i>Struts and Frets</i>. Jon Skovron's debut is, at turns, funny, sad, inspirational, and honest. And woven throughout is the music—driving Sammy and driving the story.</p> <p>Nate Phillips Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b>The Sweet Far Thing</b> (Book 3) by Libba Bray Delacorte Books for Young Readers, 2008, 848 pp., \$10.99 ISBN: 978-0-440-23777-8</p> <p>Fantasy/Friendship/Adventure</p> <p>In the last installment of Libba Bray's trilogy, Gemma Doyle and the young ladies at Spence Academy are restless. Gemma has finally unlocked the door to the realms, and thus, for her friends, unlocked the hope for independence and enchantment. Although she enjoys bestowing magic on her friends, the pressure to create peace in the realms as well as the academy becomes daunting. Gemma's mysterious visions soon force her to navigate uncharted territory in both worlds, compelling her to make meaningful decisions and explore the darkest corners of her past.</p> <p>The conclusion to Gemma's adventures can be enjoyed without reading Bray's preceding novels. Young women will appreciate the character's struggle to accept responsibility for her actions, conform to societal conventions, and please her peers. In the end, Gemma's true magic resides not in her spells, but in her capacity for self-reflection, a power all readers are likely to covet.</p> <p>Caroline McCoy Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b>Terrier</b> (Book 1 in the Beka Cooper trilogy) by Tamora Pierce Random House Books for Young Readers, 2007, 608 pp., \$9.99 ISBN: 978-0-375-83816-3</p> <p>Fantasy</p> <p>The Lower City of Corus is a rough neighborhood—so rough that no rookie in the Provost's Guard would request duty there. None but Beka Cooper, that is. She may be just a Puppy, but her upbringing in the Lower City and her ability to hear the voices of the dead allow her insight into the twisted workings of the city's criminal community. Someone is preying on the poor families of Corus, and Beka must use her unusual “birdies” to prove that the Shadow Snake is not just a scary children's story.</p> <p>With Beka, Pierce gives us another powerful heroine whose flaws are as familiar and endearing as her strengths. <i>Terrier's</i> journal format lends intimacy to a novel that is part <i>bildungsroman</i> and part mystery, and as Beka's voice develops, she earns her place in the record of Tortallan legends and as one of Pierce's most human and complex characters.</p> <p>Nicole Barrick Nashville, TN</p>

<p><b><i>This Family Is Driving Me Crazy: Ten Stories about Surviving Your Family</i></b></p> <p>Edited by M. Jerry Weiss and Helen S. Weiss G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2009, 222 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>ISBN: 978-0-399-25040-8</p> <p>“Midnight Bus to Georgia.” Walter Dean Myers’s story of an African American family going to outlandish lengths to support one another—and keep each other out of jail—concludes this volume on a raucous high note. The entire collection of stories, told exclusively through voices of adolescent narrators, includes the adventures of an extreme-thrill-seeking family, a boy who learns to love writing via his eBay sales, two tales in the “my crazy sister is getting married” genre, a near-death-fantasy-baseball experience, an obsession with eating pork that “saves” the preacher, and two stories of the “fixing” of “broken” families.</p> <p>Young adolescents won’t find any hard-hitting “problem stories” in this volume, but they will find some fun adventures with fortuitous turns and happy endings all around. The writing is serviceable, readable, and uncomplicated, and Myers’s contribution, though not his strongest work, is definitely the “literary” highlight of this collection.</p> <p>Blake Tenore Nashville, TN</p>	<p>Short fiction/Family</p> <p><b><i>Troy High</i></b> by Shana Norris Amulet Books, 2009, 272 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8109-4647-7</p> <p>Nothing quite depicts the intensity of a high school football rivalry like Greek mythology. Shana Norris has brilliantly recast the entire ensemble of Homer’s <i>Iliad</i> to fit the contemporary setting in her novel, <i>Troy High</i>. The battlefield has transformed into the football field, and the beautiful Helen of Troy is now Elena of Troy High. The Trojans and the Spartans are now football teams. Readers will be seduced by the watchful observer, Cassie, who narrates the story with a simply honesty and takes you page by page into this vengeful tale of pride, love, and glory.</p> <p>Matthew Lukach Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Wings</i></b> by Aprillyne Pike Harper Teen, 2009, 294 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Laurel grew up in a beautiful forest area; she was homeschooled by her parents and spent all of her spare time in the forest or by the river. When she was fifteen, her parents decided to move into town and enroll her in high school. She has trouble getting used to being surrounded by people and being cooped up inside. Her new life is not at all what she expected. She feels as though she is completely different from the kids around her. In fact, she felt different even before she grew wings.</p> <p>David, one of the few friends she does make, discovers that her cells are more plantlike than human. Laurel returns to the forest where she feels safe and meets the mysterious Tamami, who tells her she isn’t human at all; she’s a faerie. Laurel must not only choose between David and Tamami, she must also save her forest from the trolls.</p> <p>Melanie Hundley Nashville, TN</p>	<p>Fantasy/Fairies/Friendships ISBN: 978-0-06-166803-6</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>Melanie Hundley</b> 1021 Delmas Ave. Nashville, TN 37216-3630</p> <p><b><i>To submit a review for possible publication or to become a reviewer, contact Melanie Hundley at <a href="mailto:melanie.hundley@vanderbilt.edu">melanie.hundley@vanderbilt.edu</a>.</i></b></p>

## A Talk with Janet McDonald

**J**anet McDonald told me I would be the last person to interview her. I was. In March 2007, I traveled to a Paris hospital, and through a maze of buildings and hallways in search of her room, I got lost. Each time I stopped a hospital worker to ask if I was moving in the direction of Janet McDonald's room, I heard, "Madame McDonald? Are you the person who is writing the book about her?" When I finally arrived, Janet hurriedly ended a telephone call: "I have to go. There is a lady here and she is writing a book all about *me*."

In November 2006, I attended the ALAN Workshop where Janet spoke about the conference theme, "Young Adult Literature: Key to Open Minds." Once on stage, McDonald took a picture of the audience. She explained that the picture was being taken so that "I can go back to Paris and pretend to all my friends that you came just to see me." She was just getting started. McDonald went on to explain in a self-effacing manner that she was not a good public speaker and would probably get everything wrong. Those of us in the audience who knew her chuckled; we already knew the game. She went on to say that, "You can't give a Brooklyn girl a mike and a captive audience [without expecting a performance], so here is my tribute to the man in black," after which she began her rendition of "Ring of Fire" by Johnny Cash. The audience roared.

Behind the confident, self-possessed persona that we have come to know are memories of pain and struggle that McDonald suffered throughout her young adulthood.

In her work, McDonald takes readers back to her adolescence, when she felt confusion and fear. While she was a skilled storyteller, McDonald's goal for writing for young adults was to provide readers with the information she wished was available when she was a teenager. Growing up in a poor neighborhood where survival, rather than hope, was a way of life is difficult for a young black girl who has big dreams but no way of knowing how to make those dreams come true. At sixteen, McDonald was a high school graduate with a lot of potential, but who lived under constant fear that there was no place for her in the world to become somebody.

Like so many teenagers, McDonald got lost in the crowd and overlooked by the teachers at her school. Moreover, she felt like an outsider in her community because there were no role models who could provide her with motivation and direction. As a result, McDonald assumed her option was to work at the phone company. The thought of living a life spent without inspiration and joy depressed McDonald. With nowhere to go and no one to turn to, she spent the summer following high school graduation cloistered in her Brooklyn apartment reading books and listening to music.

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McDonald's life changed when her attention was drawn to a recruitment advertisement for an organization called Harlem Prep. "You pass the test, we'll do the rest," proclaimed the announcer as he described a college preparatory program designed to provide disadvantaged students academic and

financial support to attend prestigious colleges. McDonald was energized by the prospect of being able to attend college. Earlier that afternoon, while watching a beauty pageant on television, she recognized one of her classmates, a runner-up in the contest. McDonald explained that at that moment, she had felt complete envy and total failure. The Harlem Prep program was just what she needed. She scurried around her apartment in search of coins for the subway. She found none. However, fueled by the belief that the commercial for the Harlem Prep Program was meant just for her, she did not let her lack of subway fare stop her from getting to Harlem. She burst out of her apartment and dashed up a hill, past an expressway and on to the High Street Station. Feelings of anger, jealousy, and fear catapulted her over the station turnstile and sent her bolting down a dark tunnel of stairs, where she thrust herself on to the “A” train. McDonald entered a world of the unknown.

While her leap over the turnstile changed her life forever, McDonald never forgot where she came from and whom she left behind. Those memories of feeling lost and alone speak volumes in her work. In our conversation, McDonald remarked that her stories are the ones that she wished were available when she was growing up . . . “the stories that remind teenagers to look for possibilities no matter what their situations may be.”

McDonald shares stories about how the characters in three of her novels—*Spellbound* (2001), *Chill Wind* (2003), and *Harlem Hustle* (2006)—travel through the world of the unknown, developing confidence and courage along the way. And through her characters, readers witness McDonald’s journey from a once fearful and hopeless teenager to the vivacious woman we have all come to know.

### **Through McDonald’s Eyes: Three Novels A Not-So-Gentle Nudge**

In McDonald’s first young adult novel, *Spellbound* (2001), sixteen-year-old Raven is a high school dropout and single mother living in the Projects. Her life seems hopeless, and she is engulfed in fear. On her own, Raven feels weak. She spends her days watching daytime television and thinking about ways to escape her circumstances. Pressure is brewing for Raven because her welfare benefits are about to end. Searching for a job is futile; most positions require a high school

diploma, which Raven does not have. She receives no financial support from her son’s father, either. The final blow, however, comes when Dell, Raven’s older sister, tells her that she has a “project girl’s booty.” By this point, Raven becomes frantic. Dell’s words are painful to hear, but Raven understands the implications of her sister’s message. Having moved from the Projects, Dell is able to look at the environment from an outsider’s perspective and worries that Raven is on her way to getting stuck in a dead-end lifestyle.

When Dell helps her enroll in a spelling contest in order to win a scholarship for college, Raven is

forced to move beyond her mistakes and focus on possibilities. She is pushed even further by her friends and family to let go of negative thinking that will only keep her trapped in her current circumstances. Her winning the spelling contest and receiving a full scholarship leads critics to assert that Raven’s story ends unrealistically. McDonald explains that while growing up, her father constantly referred to her as “college material.” While the words resonated with her and led her to recognize her academic abilities, she did

not fully internalize the power of what her father’s words could do. As an author, she wanted to communicate to readers that even though mistakes happen, there are second chances. Raven and McDonald are similar in that they both recognize the encouragement they receive, but readers also come to understand that words are just not enough, so according to McDonald, “Sometimes we need a not-so-gentle nudge to set things in motion.”

### **A Look at Personal Failure**

Aisha, the protagonist in McDonald’s second young adult novel, *Chill Wind* (2003), appears to be apathetic about her family’s future. She is a high school dropout, a project girl, who does not seem to mind

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**In our conversation, McDonald remarked that her stories are the ones that she wished were available when she was growing up . . . “the stories that remind teenagers to look for possibilities no matter what their situations may be.”**

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living the lifestyle of a so-called “welfare queen.” Like Raven, she will lose her welfare benefits soon. Aisha, however, searches for solutions to her impending financial problems much differently than Raven. For instance, Aisha visits a social service agency where she tries to convince them that she suffers from psychological problems that will prevent her from entering the workforce. After a series of failed attempts at avoiding the workfare program, Aisha hits bottom. Her benefits expire, and she is assigned the job of

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## McDonald’s leap over the subway turnstile sends a powerful message to those who encounter roadblocks.

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cleaning subway stations. The dark, smelly, rodent-infested tunnels become Aisha’s tangible reminder of her personal failures. Motivated by anger at the system and anger towards herself, Aisha vows to change her circumstances. With no high school diploma or work experience, however, her options are

limited. This is the turning point of the novel.

McDonald came of age hearing her father’s disdain for people like Aisha. As a founding family of Brooklyn’s Farragut Homes, the McDonalds witnessed the shifts in thinking about being a contributing citizen of society; Mr. McDonald, believed this shift caused people to become “recipients instead of workers.” The image of the welfare mother persists today. In *Chill Wind*, McDonald challenges the dominant narrative of the young, uneducated, single parent on welfare by complicating the narrative in order to remind readers that poor people are not a monolithic group. Instead, characters such as Raven and Aisha differ greatly in terms of their personal strengths and goals, but their desire to rise above challenging circumstances is what connects them to each other and to readers.

### Power of the Spirit

For most of his adolescence, Eric “Hustle” Samson learns to survive on his own. As the protagonist in McDonald’s fifth novel, *Harlem Hustle* (2005), Hustle’s search for self concludes with a transformation of identity brought on by the help of various mentors. McDonald’s implicit message of the importance of

relying on personal strength and the support of others is the focus of Hustle’s story. McDonald believed that family is what you make it. Though Hustle does not have the support of his biological family, his girlfriend’s grandmother and best friend’s parents form a sort of extended family. With their encouragement, Hustle discovers his personal strength even as his lack of parental boundaries provides an opportunity for him to try out several identities.

Hustle learns several lessons the hard way: he learns he is not cut out for the life of a petty thief when, during one of his episodes of stealing, he is outsmarted by a group of girls; he finds danger and learns that naiveté and business do not mix when, at what is supposed to be a meeting where he hopes to procure a lucrative contract as a rap star, his music is stolen and his life is threatened; having lost his parents to drug addiction, Hustle rejects an offer to sell drugs. Although he is intelligent, traditional school does not hold his attention. Eventually, Hustle is able to examine his failures and successes and thus discovers that he cannot do everything on his own.

With the help of the Whitelys, the parents of his best friend, Nate, Hustle receives emotional support. Nanna, his girlfriend Jeanette’s grandmother, provides spiritual guidance as she helps Hustle realize that he does not have to use bad language, objectify women in his songs, or avoid education. Instead, there are alternative means to achieving success. While there are challenges awaiting Hustle on the road ahead, he is armed with a support network and a strong belief in himself.

Like Hustle, McDonald needed the space to figure out where she belonged in the world. For the first time, she felt like a member of a supportive environment when she was a student at Harlem Prep; however, her graduation from the program brought back the feelings of isolation and alienation that she experienced in high school. Not having the advantage of trying out different identities in various settings, as Hustle does, McDonald felt guilty about her ability to leave her familiar life and become something else. Unfortunately, while she physically traveled to unknown places, her mind and heart were split between past and future. Hustle’s character, then, is her anecdote for the residual pain that living in a state of double consciousness evokes.

## Conclusion

McDonald's leap over the subway turnstile sends a powerful message to those who encounter roadblocks. A sense of personal worth and strength are the elements needed to overpower borders and survive the unknown. Her characters—Raven, Aisha, and Hustle—each possess qualities that help them to change their lives. A not-so-gentle nudge in the right direction, an exposure to what personal failure looks like, and emotional and spiritual guidance are just a few of the ways in which McDonald learned to go on, despite adversity in her own life.

*Catherine Ross-Stroud* is an assistant professor of Literature and Language Arts at Cleveland State University. A former secondary school English teacher, she teaches language arts methods to preservice and graduate-level students. She is the author of *Janet McDonald: The Original Project Girl* (Scarecrow 2008).

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## Carolyn Phipps – 2009 CEL Exemplary Leader Award Recipient

The 2009 CEL Exemplary Leader Award Recipient is Carolyn Phipps. Phipps, a member of NCTE since 1972, is the Director of Studies at St. Mary's Episcopal School in Memphis, Tennessee. She started work there after teaching English in the Memphis City Schools for 34 years, including time at Southside High School, Oakhaven High School, and as English supervisor for the district. In 1995, she decided to return to the classroom at Wooddale High School. There she was Instructional Facilitator, AP English teacher, and coordinator of the Optional Aviation Program. Mrs. Phipps attended Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, and holds a Bachelor of Science and Masters of Education from the University of Memphis. She is a Career Ladder III teacher. In 1996, she was selected as a Rotary Teacher of Excellence. In addition, she was selected as Tennessee English Teacher of Excellence by TCTE.

Believing that professional affiliation improves teaching, Mrs. Phipps has served educational organizations in various capacities on the local, state, and national levels. She recently retired as Executive Director of the Tennessee Council of Teachers of English. She has been a member of the Secondary Section of the National Council of Teachers of English Steering Committee and served on NCTE's Editorial Board. Knowing that affiliates are the life blood of NCTE, she was Region 3 director and then SCOA chairperson. Because she knows that new teachers need support, she began the Mentoring program for the Shelby-Memphis Council of Teachers of English and was instrumental in the revision of the Tennessee Literary Map. She also served on the Language Arts Advisory Council for Tennessee. Mrs. Phipps has been a member of the Association of Secondary School Curriculum Development, Tennessee Middle School Association, Adolescent Literature Association, American Literature Association, Conference on English Leadership, Delta Kappa Gamma, and International Reading Association. Mrs. Phipps also has served on the state committee for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI).

Carolyn Phipps embodies all the values and ideals of leadership that qualify her to receive this year's CEL Exemplary Leader Award.

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# Battling Greek Mythology, History, and Reluctant Readers:

An Interview with Rick Riordan

Those of us lucky enough to find an advance reading copy of Rick Riordan's *The Lightning Thief* in our bags at the 2004 ALAN Conference were probably hooked from the start by Rick Riordan's updating of the Greeks gods and their myths and the introduction of a younger generation of demigods (half god, half mortal) led by Percy Jackson. Those attending the 2008 ALAN Conference not only found the fourth installment in our boxes but also had the pleasure of hearing Riordan speak as part of the urban fantasy panel.

Now that the fifth and final book of the Percy Jackson series has come out, Riordan shares with us his experiences as a classroom teacher, his upcoming projects, and his thoughts on reading. His website (<http://www.rickriordan.com/>) features conversations with the author, curriculum guides, and information about all of his novels. The following interview was conducted just before the fifth book's release.

**TAR:** *First, I would like to say how impressed I am with your books, and I very much enjoyed your talk at last year's ALAN Conference. Your books, like the infamous Reverend Wilbert Awdry's Thomas the Tank Engine, grew out of the stories told by a father to his son. If you don't mind my asking, what role do your children play in your writing?*



**RR:** I have two sons, ages 14 and 11, and they are always my first audience. I'd never dream of sending a manuscript to my editor until my sons vetted it. I've found that reading the book aloud to my boys is incredibly helpful to my writing process. It keeps the narrator's voice consistent and snappy, and it helps me keep the story moving.

My sons sometimes offer advice, but more often they let me know how they

feel just from their reactions. If they're confused, they'll ask questions, and I'll know that I need to clarify a passage. If I write a joke that I think is hysterical and they don't laugh, the joke gets cut. If they start to fidget and their attention wanders, I know I need to tighten up that section.

**TAR:** *You taught English and social studies for fifteen years and have mentioned that Percy is actually a combination of several of your former students. Can you talk a little bit about how your time spent teaching works its way into your novels? For example, did you get the idea about Percy's returnable pen/sword Riptide because your students' writing utensils went missing (I know mine did)? Or, are the magical items, like Annabeth's invisibility cap an interpretation of what you think kids would create?*

**RR:** My writing is informed equally by my experiences as a student and as a teacher. When I was in elementary school, my attention would wander easily. I used to daydream that my pen could turn into a sword. That’s where Riptide came from. Like Percy, I was not exactly a model student. I would get into trouble because I was very verbal, but I was also a reluctant reader. In high school, I never read a single book that was assigned in class. Not one. I would make As and Bs because I’d simply listen to class discussion and regurgitate the main points. I could write a great essay. I just didn’t want to read the books because they seemed boring to me. Of course, my karmic punishment was to become an English teacher. In college, I went back and read all that stuff I never touched in high school, but by then I was a little older and more ready to appreciate it. This experience gave me a lot of sympathy for the reluctant reader. In my own writing, I make a conscious effort to craft a story that will reach every student in a class, not just the students who love reading already.

When I wrote the *Lightning Thief*, I imagined myself reading the manuscript to my own classes. I tried to design a book that would keep the kids engaged, even right after lunch. If you’ve taught in the classroom, you know that’s a very difficult litmus test. Many of my characters, like Percy, are based on my favorite students. Usually those were not the honor roll students; instead, they were the students who came in thinking school was boring, found something they could relate to, and suddenly lit up in class. Those are the students who would make my year.

Being familiar with middle school, I felt like I had a pretty good understanding of what kids find funny, what they find interesting, what they find boring. My classroom philosophy has always been to make learning relevant and fun. I wanted kids to leave my classroom at the end of the year with a positive attitude toward reading. I tried to take the same approach with my writing.

**TAR:** *The obvious connections to mythology lend themselves to many mandated curriculums, so the possibilities of integrating your series into the classroom is a natural fit. How are the curriculum guides featured on your website created?*

**RR:** When the *Lightning Thief* was being prepared for publication, one of the first things I did was to create my own teacher’s guide, drawing on my favorite activities from my years in the classroom. If you’re like me, you’ve seen a lot of really horrible classroom guides that seem to have been written by someone with absolutely no clue what really happens in a classroom. I tried to make my teacher’s guide useful in the real world—something you could pick up and run with. As you can imagine, creating the guide took a huge amount of time and energy, but I think it was worth it. Every year, I get hundreds of thank-you letters from teachers who have used the guide in their classes. Because of time constraints, I haven’t written guides for the other books in the Percy Jackson series. There are guides available, but they’re created by the publisher and are more like discussion guides. Still, I think if teachers are going to incorporate the Percy Jackson series in the curriculum, they will most likely start with the first book.

Along with the guide, I created a curriculum rationale based on NCTE standards so that teachers would have some ammunition when facing censorship. I figured with magic, Greek gods, etc., there would be a lot of that. Surprisingly, the books haven’t run into a lot of resistance. Very occasionally, I hear of a parent protesting on religious grounds, but most people seem to realize that Greek mythology is part of our cultural heritage. Knowing about Classical Greece and Rome is part of being an educated person.

**TAR:** *How do you hope they (those guides) are/are not being used?*

**RR:** Mythology is a high-interest subject for kids. If it’s taught well, they eat it up. I hope that teachers are able to use my guide and my books to bring mythology to life—to make it seem relevant and modern. The themes explored in Greek mythology are just as important now as they were thousands of years ago—loyalty, heroism, hubris, family. I’m always happy when teachers and librarians tell me that Percy Jackson was a gateway for students to get interested in the original stories. They read Homer in high school and say, “Hey, that’s what happened in Percy Jackson!”

### I Risk Being Shot by an Author

In his introduction to *Demigods and Monsters* (Riordan & Wilson, 2008), Riordan points to a lasting influence of mythology and the role it plays in his novels: “We are still creating myths all the time. My books, among other things, explore the myth of America as the beacon of civilization, the myth of New York, and the myth of the American teenager” (p. xi). Those three myths culminate in the final installment of the Percy Jackson series. In *The Last Olympian* (Riordan, 2009), Percy Jackson is about to turn sixteen and face the Oracle’s prophecy. He and his fellow campers attempt to protect Mount Olympus (on the 600th floor of the Empire State Building) from the titan Kronos’ attack. As Percy learns more about his enemies and their histories, he has trouble deciding whether to save the gods or have them destroyed.

With prophecies, sleep-away camps, villains with sympathetic histories, and young adults with exceptional talents, it seems inevitable that any young adult fantasy series written after (or during) J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* will find itself being compared with the Bard herself. However, Riordan’s stories are rooted in Greek mythology whereas Rowling’s blend various archetypes and literary references to create new characters with new histories. Ultimately, Riordan’s stories are more than just an updating of classical Greek mythology; they present a nuanced view of life in contemporary America.

In the novels, Percy travels west across the United States, eats French fries and shakes at diners, plays at arcades and amusement parks, and engages in battles at iconic American landmarks. Demeter and Persephone eat cereal; Poseidon wears Tommy Bahama, and his throne on Mount Olympus is a deep-sea fisherman’s chair; New York now serves as the site for Mount Olympus. However, the reader glimpses the dangers of pollution, consumerism, and life on the streets. Alongside the majestic trees in Central Park are the polluted depths of the Hudson River, and the people in New York defend the city until the end.

Percy’s friends also defy simplistic generalizations as mere representations of their parents. From Ethan Nakamura, the son of Nemesis (the lesser goddess of revenge), to his satyr friend, Grover, Percy learns the importance of balance in any world—mortal or Olympic. In fact, Percy and his friends resemble what O’Quinn (2004) describes as “radical mutant teens” who “are not about becoming someone else’s notion of who they should be; they are about accepting the uniqueness of their own promise and limits” (p. 52). Percy’s uniqueness is found in his willingness to truly listen to the needs of all creatures, from his pet hellhound, Mrs. O’Leary, to his nemesis, Luke.

Working with classical and contemporary mythologies, Riordan’s infusion of Greek mythology into modern-day America illuminates what makes this country the great complicated place it is.

**TAR:** *For those readers not fortunate enough to have you visit their schools, what do you focus on during those presentations, and how do those audiences respond to your works/ visits?*

**RR:** I’ve actually stopped doing school visits for the foreseeable future, which I have mixed feelings about. I love visiting schools because it lets me feel like I’m still a classroom teacher. For the last four years, I’ve toured all over the U.S. and U.K. and worked with tens of thousands of kids. It’s extremely gratifying to see how excited kids have gotten about the books. Typically in my presentations, I talk about how I became a writer and how I got started with the Percy Jackson series. I show pictures of my manuscripts and my brainstorming

notes. I talk about how many drafts I have to do on each book (typically 5–14) so students won’t feel so bad the next time they are asked to do a second draft of an essay. I show the different cover treatments from different countries. We do a lot of Q&A, and I do a quiz game on Greek mythology. Students always know all the answers, which amazes the teachers every time, but I’m not surprised. Students are more aware of mythology than most adults realize.

The downside of school visits is that they take me away from my writing, and as the demands on my time have grown, it’s become increasingly difficult to meet my deadlines. Right now I’ve got so many irons in the fire, I had to make the decision to stop traveling, at least for a

while, so I can tend to my job of getting the books out. Also as I mentioned, I'm the father of two sons, and I want to be there for my kids. That's really my primary job. The constant travel has just become too difficult for my family.

**TAR:** *Authors who write for young adults are often asked what young adult literature they read. I'm not necessarily going to ask you this question (but feel free to answer it); I'd rather know what pieces of literature you enjoyed teaching your students.*

**RR:** I read a lot of young adult literature. Whenever I go to a school, I ask the kids what they are reading, and we share recommendations. (Not what they are required to read, mind you—rather, what they are reading on their own.) I try to read at least one book by every author I hear about, just so I have a sense for what's out there. Not surprisingly, I tend to gravitate toward YA fantasy, because that's what I write and what I enjoy, but I'll read just about anything.

As a classroom teacher, my biggest thrill was taking a book that wasn't immediately accessible or an obvious kid-pleaser and turning it into a positive experience. *To Kill a Mockingbird* can be a really difficult read, but it can also be a very successful unit. It all depends on how well it's taught. I used to do a huge Shakespeare unit with my eighth graders. Again, that can be a really tough sell, but we would turn into an Elizabethan acting troupe, take sword-fighting lessons, dress in costume, and learn to insult each other in Elizabethan English; suddenly, the Bard seemed very relevant to middle schoolers. Basically, whatever book I taught, I tried to find the connection with the kids. I tried to make it come alive.

**TAR:** *A movie in the works; what about a video game?*

**RR:** That's up to Fox. They hold those rights.

**TAR:** *My 5-year-old son and I recently read/listened to your contribution to a new series: The 39 Clues: Maze of Bones. I understand other authors will write the subsequent volumes. What are your thoughts/experiences with that series? Like your other novels, it seems to continue your work as an educator.*

**RR:** Book 1 will be my only installment in *39 Clues*, simply because of time constraints. I have a lot of other projects in the works with Disney-Hyperion, including a fantasy adventure that comes out next spring and a new Camp Half-Blood series that will probably launch in late 2010.

I agreed to work on the *39 Clues* because it struck me as a great subversive way to teach kids world history. When I designed the story arc for the series, I basically used my "greatest hits" from my social studies class. I picked the topics that my students had enjoyed the most and used them as the focal points for the 10-book series. By the time kids have read the whole series, they'll have gone all over the world. If it gets kids interested in world history the way Percy Jackson has gotten them interested in Greek mythology, I'll be happy! So far, early indications are very positive.

**TAR:** *As a follow-up to that question, there are subtle hints to your readers on environmental issues. Would you care to share with us your philosophy on the environment? I like the idea of not only making our students/readers aware of these issues, but also sending them a message that they can do something about our planet.*

**RR:** I think the key word there is "subtle." I don't want to use YA fiction as a soapbox and hit people over the head with a message. Is Grover's search for Pan a metaphor? Sure. But I hope it speaks for itself, and I'll let readers make of it what they will. To quote Mark Twain (my literary hero): "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot."

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## Beyond Relevance to Literary Merit: Young Adult Literature as “Literature”

“Thus the act of recognizing literature is not constrained by something in the text, nor does it issue from an independent and arbitrary will; rather, it proceeds from a collective decision as to what will count as literature, a decision that will be in force only so long as a community of readers or believers continues to abide by it.”

—Fish, 11

**W**hen Melanie Hundley, on behalf of the new editors of *The ALAN Review*—Steven Bickmore, Melanie Hundley, and Jacqueline Bach—asked us (Anna and Sean) to write a column for their first issue of the *The ALAN Review* on the theme, “Young Adult Literature Gaining Stature at the High School,” we responded with a resounding “Yes!” Anna’s work in promoting the literary qualities of young adult literature and her seminars with middle and high school teachers on the application of a platter of critical approaches to a wide range of young adult novels, speaks to outgoing editors Jim Blasingame and Lori Goodson’s assertion that young adult literature is “quality” literature (3). Likewise, Sean’s work with aspiring teachers among the college juniors and seniors who take his required introductory course in young adult literature focuses on a similar attribute.

We take the stand in this column that young adult literature has already come of age in terms of its relevance to adolescents. We also believe that the time is ripe for us, and for *The ALAN Review*, to push

for its acceptance as “Literature” by high school teachers. We have found, both in our teaching and in our personal reading, that a considerable body of young adult literature can withstand the test of close literary scrutiny. We consequently argue that the next move is to engage those who might otherwise question young adult literature’s literary merit in what Peter Elbow describes as a “believing game” (1), thereby helping them become more receptive to the possibility that

young adult literature is not only about subjects and themes that are relevant to adolescent readers, but that its treatment of those subjects and themes reflects a level of sophistication that invites serious interrogation on the part of readers eager for a marriage of intellectual and affective engagement (cf. Soter, Faust, and Rogers).

We support our assertion with two vignettes, the first drawn from Sean’s teaching at The Ohio State University. For the past few years, Sean has taught a course that is designed to introduce undergraduates interested in pursuing a career in secondary education to the field of young adult literature. During

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that time, he has found that a good number of students—particularly those who are English majors—enter the course holding strong ideas about young adult literature’s educational value. Most students readily acknowledge young adult literature’s relevance to adolescent readers; they are less apt, however, to recognize its literary merit.

To challenge their thinking, Sean opts to begin the course by asking the students to work in small groups and answer the question, “What are the defining characteristics of ‘Literature?’” His intention is to establish a foundation that will allow them to read with an eye toward determining for themselves whether or not the characteristics they associate with “Literature” are evident in the assigned novels. The exercise invariably proves vexing for the majority of students. Faced with the need to unpack their definition of “Literature,” they struggle. Asked to explain why they think this is the case, they often tell Sean that they have not considered this question before and, perhaps more significant, their perceptions of what “counts” as “Literature” have been shaped largely by the texts they read as high school and university students, the majority of which, not surprisingly, were canonical and written for an adult audience. That literature for adolescents might be stylistically complex, that it might withstand rigorous critical scrutiny, and that it might set forth thoughtful social and political commentaries has simply not occurred to them.

That the adult literature customarily studied in high school is challenging is acknowledged by most, if not all, English teachers. Similarly, it is a given that students other than above-average readers lack the motivation needed to study advanced literary texts (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith). Recognizing this, we find that we are confronted by a number of questions. What makes a body of literature appear to be “grown up”? What defines a body of literature as worthy of the title “Literature”? Is it that the adult literature typically selected for study in high schools constitutes what we collectively consider to be a “body of knowledge that [students] should share with others” (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith 23)? Is young adult literature not viewed as the kind of literature that conveys this implicitly valued “body of knowledge,” the result of which causes it to be regarded as, at best, a supplementary form of reading material? Does Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* not qualify as “Literature” in

the same way that Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* does, and, if so, why not? Is not Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* on a par with Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge*?

Many would argue that the young adult novels we have identified here should not be compared with the canonical literary texts; indeed, some would suggest that such comparisons are drawn at the expense of the young adult novels. We believe, however, that the aforementioned young adult novels do indeed qualify as “Literature,” and that they, along with the other young adult novels we refer to in this column (among others) are deserving of literary study precisely *because* they have literary merit. To demonstrate this point, we would like to share a second vignette.

Students, whether undergraduate or graduate, generally have a moderate to strong background in canonical literature and typically assert a strong love of literature. They tend to be curious about young adult literature, but are not convinced that it is as rich, as deep, as powerfully moving, and as complex as the literature they are accustomed to reading. Knowing that Sean’s undergraduates and her own graduate students in a seminar on Young Adult Literature and Literary Theories either have strong backgrounds in English literature or have taught English for many years in middle and high school settings, Anna decided to challenge their thinking.

At the start of Anna’s course named above, Anna presents students with a list of 20 excerpts—ten drawn from young adult novels and ten from literature written by canonical authors, although not the most commonly taught novels. Each excerpt is “blind” (author and title are omitted) and consciously selected for its lack of clues to the protagonists’ age or circumstances; the intention is to have students focus exclusively on the texts’ stylistic aspects—sophistication of insight, depth in treatment of character, thematic complexity, and fine, incisive writing that lures read-

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ers in. Given the students' strong literary background, she assumes that they have reasonably strong beliefs about what does and does not constitute "quality" literature.

After distributing the excerpts, Anna asks students to identify which excerpts are drawn from YA novels and which are drawn from canonical texts. The results, albeit informal to date, reveal that detecting sources is far more challenging than the students anticipate. They freely admit that when they identify an excerpt as coming from a young adult text, it is

usually a guess based on inferred clues about a character's age or circumstances. Some have memories of reading a young adult novels (e.g., Naylor's *Shiloh*; Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*; Spinelli's *Maniac Magee*) when in upper elementary and/or middle grades, but because these students typically fill the ranks of highly proficient literary readers, their literary diet in the middle and high school years quickly shifts to an exclusive focus on canonical texts. What is important to note, however, is that they rarely make a selection based on style—that is, they do not argue that one excerpt is more simplistic in its por-

trayal of character, setting, or perspective. The results of this informal experiment inevitably surprise the students and pique their interest in young adult novels; they begin to suspect that YA novels have "more to offer" than they originally thought, an observation that is shared each time this experiment is conducted.

This does not surprise either of us, however. Rites of passage, hero journeys, and identity issues are a common preoccupation among all writers—we seek to discover ourselves in terms of the contexts in which we find ourselves; we seek to grow no matter how afraid we are or how painful the passage toward growth may be. To be sure, rites of passage,

identity issues, placement of self in the larger social and cultural context, and discovery of self in terms of (and against) defined roles are very much issues that confront young adults as they emerge from childhood. They are not, however, the sole domain of adolescence. To the contrary, they are issues that concern all of us as human beings, regardless of age.

Much like literature written for adults, we believe that young adult literature is capable of providing thoughtful social and political commentary that raises questions about complex issues—immigration (Anna's *A Step from Heaven*), the exploitation of children (Patricia McCormick's *Sold*), sexual orientation (M. E. Kerr's *Deliver Us from Evie*), terrorism (Cormier's *After the First Death*), roles of men and women in contemporary culture, social and political responsibility (M. T. Anderson's *Feed*), the individual challenge of social and political institutions (Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games*), social conformity, religion (Pete Hautman's *Godless*), poverty, political morality (Walter Dean Myers's *Fallen Angels*), patriotism (Collier's *My Brother Sam Is Dead*), the strength of individuals to face disaster (Paul Volponi's *Hurricane Song: A Novel of New Orleans*), and the individual in search of enduring truths (Gary Paulsen's *The Island*), among others.

In their initial encounter with young adult novels, and prior to their extended reading in our courses, our students have argued that young adult literature lacks the sort of artistic mastery evidenced in canonical texts. Yet neither of us regards the sort of engaging writing that draws readers into a work of fiction as the exclusive property of adult literature. The dramatic, unapologetic, sparse replay of a violent moment in a school football game that introduces us to the protagonist of *The Chocolate War* serves as an example:

*They murdered him.*

*As he turned to take the ball, a dam burst against the side of his head and a hand grenade shattered his stomach. Engulfed by nausea, he pitched toward the grass. His mouth encountered gravel, and he spat frantically, afraid that some of his teeth had been knocked out. Rising to his feet, he saw the field through drifting gauze but held on until everything settled into place, like a lens focusing, making the world sharp again, with edges. (1)*

Likewise, one might consider the opening passage from Mary Stolz's *Cezanne Pinto: A Memoir*:

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**Rites of passage, identity issues, placement of self in the larger social and cultural context, and discovery of self in terms of (and against) defined roles . . . are not . . . the sole domain of adolescence. To the contrary, they are issues that concern all of us as human beings, regardless of age.**

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*In 1860, when I ran from the plantation in Virginia, I decided to be twelve years old. Could've been anywhere from nine to fourteen, but as Frederick Douglass, that great man said, you might as well ask a horse how hold he is as a slave.*

*Twelve sounded all right to me, then. Now my beaky nose is pushing the ninety mark (or past it, who knows?) and one day follows another like one boxcar coupled to another boxcar, all of them back of an engine going nowhere. This is an observation, not a complaint. I have had a life crammed with love, labor, exhilaration, exhaustion, rage, pain, pleasure.*

*And now?* (3)

As we do with our students, so, too, would we challenge readers to ask what makes one novel worthy of the title “Literature” and another not. Is not a good story a good story no matter what the age for which it is written? Can we declare, definitively, and with good “scientific” evidence, that the following excerpts from two adult novels written by authors who are high on the canonical pedestal (each in their own countries, studied for the literary merits of their works) are more worthily “literary” than the aforementioned examples? The first excerpt is drawn from the opening lines from Huxley’s *Island*:

*“Attention,” a voice began to call, and it was as though an oboe had suddenly become articulate. “Attention,” it repeated in the same high, nasal monotone. “Attention.”*

*Lying there like a corpse in the dead leaves, his hair matted, his face grotesquely smudged and bruised, his clothes in rags and muddy, Will Farnaby awoke with a start. Molly had called him. Time to get up. Time to get dressed. Mustn’t be late at the office.* (1)

Or consider the opening paragraph of Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*:

*Robert Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton. Do not think that I am very much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn. He cared nothing for boxing. In fact, he disliked it, but he learned it painfully and thoroughly to counteract the feeling of inferiority and shyness he had felt on being treated as a Jew at Princeton. There was a certain inner comfort in knowing he could knock down anybody who was snooty to him, although being a very shy and thoroughly nice boy, he never fought except in the gym.* (3).

Again, we ask what qualifies each of these opening paragraphs as adult/canonical literature, and what distinguishes them from the opening paragraphs excerpted from the young adult novels cited earlier? We confess that we are hard-pressed to find a differ-

ence in terms of quality of engagement. In both cases, we find that the capacity of each of the texts to draw us into the rest of the fiction is equally compelling; the opening lines suggest engrossing possibilities; the flavor is equally stylistically sophisticated.

Appleman’s arguments for the incorporation of literary theory in high school classrooms echo those made by Soter. Yet, whereas Appleman focuses exclusively on canonical texts, Soter advocates using literary theory to gauge the literary quality of young adult texts. Regardless, both authors assume that the texts themselves can bear the scrutiny of the discerning, thoughtful, reflective reader. Literary theory, argues Appleman,

“sharpens one’s vision and provides alternative ways of seeing”; “brings into relief, things we fail to notice” in first readings; and “recontextualizes the familiar and comfortable, making us reappraise it” (2). The chief difference between Appleman’s and Soter’s work is that the latter argues an additional case—specifically, for the inclusion of young adult novels in the high school classroom on the grounds that this literature, today, is powerfully written and rivals the best of adult literature for enduring, compelling, deep subject matter and themes. Like Phelan, we recognize that:

*Sophistication is not the same as difficulty (although the two may sometimes overlap). Difficulty is a measure of a text’s accessibility, while sophistication is a measure of its skill in bending means to ends. Subjecting the text to the questions provided by literary theory is an excellent way of testing its sophistication.* (xi)

That young adult literature should have “grown up” so far as the issue of literary sophistication is concerned is hardly surprising. Indeed, the crossover success experienced by J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books has motivated a number of accomplished authors that have written for adult audiences to try their hand at writing for teenagers. Notable titles published in recent years include Sherman Alexie’s *The*

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*Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Joyce Carol Oates's *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl*, and Jennifer Donnelly's *A Northern Light*. Indeed, M. T. Anderson, whose two-part novel, *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing: Traitor to the Nation*, is notable for its literary ambition, has attested to his commitment to "being part of [a] movement for true literature for teens, as opposed to simply books written for teens" (Goodnow par. 11).

As we see it, the challenge in terms of the educational system rests in acknowledging what many

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**We would argue that relevance is but *one* reason for embracing young adult literature. It's potential literary sophistication, coupled with its treatment of complex social issues, are equally important.**

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teachers already know—namely, that the key benefit in adopting young adult literature as a core curriculum for the study of literature and literary elements lies in its accessibility to young people. To be sure, the relevance issue is significant. We are all more readily able to connect to that which speaks to us because it represents experiences with which we can identify. Librarians have long touted young adult literature

because they, more than teachers, are familiar with what adolescents check out of school libraries and local community libraries. That said, we would argue that relevance is but *one* reason for embracing young adult literature. It's potential literary sophistication, coupled with its treatment of complex social issues, are equally important. Glenn et al. reveal how young adult literature provides teachers with the means for turning reluctant readers into avid readers. Yet they also chronicle how teachers can use such texts as an avenue for teaching close reading—the kind of reading that is essential for successful performance on state standardized tests, and the kind of reading, not coincidentally, that is valued in many high school English classes.

In conclusion, when we consider the state of young adult literature as it exists today, it is impossible not to recognize the growth it has experienced. We have moved well beyond the sort of didactic fiction that was once written for adolescents (i.e., the

junior novel) and that we remember reading as kids. Indeed, like Mertz, we admit to having enjoyed reading many of those books, didactic as they were, and, as teenagers, we preferred them to the classics. And yet we believe that, as a field, we continue to set forth the same, somewhat tired argument for using young adult literature, one that focuses on its relevance to teenagers. This isn't to suggest that such an argument doesn't have its place. It does. We willingly concede that young adult literature reflects the interests and concerns of teenagers, and we suspect that most secondary teachers would agree. However, we also believe that young adult literature has the kind of literary merit that canonical literature demonstrates.

If we ever expect young adult literature to find a place in the classroom, then those of us who work in the trenches or who have a passion for thoughtful, smartly written books must be willing to subject it to the same high standards we hold for adult literature. Indeed, as Daniels argues, "If we, as scholars and as readers, don't bother to hold the YA work up to the light of crucial literary standards, then it is no wonder the works are not being taken seriously" (79). The fact of the matter is that young adult literature has grown up. The question is, will we, as scholars, continue to grow with it?

*Dr. Anna Soter is Professor of English Education/Young Adult and Children's Literature at The Ohio State University. Anna has long held a passionate interest in promoting Young Adult Literature as a field worthy of inquiry and as a playing field for literary analysis (e.g., in publications such as How Porcupines Make Love II and III with Alan Purves and Theresa Rogers; Reading Across Cultures, coedited with Theresa Rogers; Young Adult Literature and The New Literary Theories; and most recently, her coedited book, Interpretive Play: Using Critical Perspectives to Teach Young Adult Literature). She is also a poet and an active member of the poetry community in Ohio. Over the past six years, she has developed workshops and seminars in the teaching of poetry in middle and high schools. Her enduring passion has been to bring recognition to the value of young adult literature as a body of literature that merits critical attention; even more important, in her eyes, she promotes YA novels as a body of literature that intellectually and affectively engages and challenges readers of all ages.*

*Sean Connors is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in English Education at The Ohio State University. Prior to returning*

to graduate school, he was a high school English teacher for twelve years, the last five of which he spent at Coconino High School in Flagstaff, Arizona. Since he began doctoral studies, Sean has taught undergraduate courses in Young Adult Literature and an English Education Lab Experience course for potential preservice English language arts teachers. He is particularly interested in the growth of graphic novels as a field of inquiry and in expanding the use of diverse critical perspectives in secondary school literature curricula. He enjoys spending time with his wife and dogs, rooting for the Red Sox, and reading graphic and young adult novels.

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## Integrating Graphica into Your Curriculum: Recommended Titles for Grades 6–12

**T**hanks to the recent proliferation of professional development workshops and books on graphic literature, both for youth librarians and classroom teachers, the question of whether the medium has a place in reading is no longer so controversial. Now conversations have shifted beyond the “engagement factor” and the “acceptance/rationale issue” and have started to focus on best practices and how to integrate comics, graphic novels, nonfiction, and manga into the ELA curriculum.

To that end, I’ve compiled a list of those titles that might feel right at home in the 6–12 classroom. By no means does the list represent an attempt at canon construction, or even a more personal list of “favorites,” but rather an overview of titles that contain significant literary merit and can accomplish multiple curricular goals. That they should hold appeal, both in content and theme, for middle and high school students is, of course, another important consideration.

I’ve intentionally aimed at variety here, particularly when it comes to not over-representing particular creators. Will Eisner, for example, produced numerous landmark works that could just as easily be substituted for the one singled out here, and I encourage educators to familiarize themselves with his body of work. Similarly, there are some titles, such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Jeff Smith’s *Bone*, that are so beloved and respected that to include them here would be superfluous. Rapidly joining them, however, are three titles that I’ve noticed slowly but surely forming a kind of mini-canon across the US: *American Born Chinese*, usually taught at middle school; *Persepolis*, a high school text at various grade levels; and

*Watchmen*, for high school juniors, seniors, and AP classes. With that in mind, let’s start with Gene Luen Yang’s National Book Award nominee and Printz Award-winner . . .

### ***American Born Chinese*** by Gene Luen Yang

It’s hard to imagine a graphic work that is better suited for grades 6–12 instruction than this. Its themes of assimilation, conformity, identity, and the price that is sometimes paid for popularity at school can’t help but resonate with students. But that’s just the beginning. Brimming with humor, some of which is merciless in its depiction of Chinese stereotypes, this graphic novel also comprises an artful and exciting retelling of the Monkey King legend. Indeed, by alternating among three separate storylines that clearly parallel each other before he allows them to converge in a surprising, satisfying ending, Yang (himself a California teacher) provides an almost diagrammatic way for students to deepen their understanding of how theme and symbol work in literature. In addition, educators such as Melissa Schieble of the University of Wisconsin–Madison have shown how *American Born Chinese* can be used to introduce critical literacy into the curriculum in ways that are natural and powerful.

### ***The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*** by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón

There are, increasingly, many accomplished nonfiction graphic titles that can be integrated into the ELA curriculum, but few if any have the unique advantages of this one. First, it’s based upon a document that itself is not only of historical importance, but also easy to

obtain, thereby permitting your class to study the process of trans-media adaptation. (You can download a copy of the nearly 600-page report from <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>.) Second, the terrorist attacks of September 11 are, sadly, still fresh in the memory of many, enabling you to generate ancillary assignments, such as compiling an oral history of that fateful day or conducting other types of firsthand research. Moreover, Colón's art is simultaneously evocative and restrained, and the way that Jacobson has inventively organized the material on a page-by-page, panel-by-panel basis provides an exemplar of how to structure expository text as well as how to use text features and visuals to convey complex information.

***Black Jack*** by Osamu Tezuka

The towering master of manga, Tezuka may have produced better-known creations (*Astro Boy*) or ones that are more sweeping and profound (*Buddha*), but I'm selecting *Black Jack* (only recently available widely in English) for a couple of reasons. First, while manga series, such as the multi-volume *Buddha*, can be overwhelming in scope when it comes to curriculum mapping, *Black Jack* consists entirely of short stories. They do build on each other in a loose way, with the protagonist's backstory revealed bit by bit, but really they are simply gems of the short form, and as such, they fit well with canon works such as those by Poe, Maupassant, or Bradbury. Featuring a Sherlock Holmes-like renegade surgeon (think *TV's House*), each story presents self-contained ethical dilemmas and/or elements of the literature of the fantastic. Moreover, these adventures helped inspire an entire generation of doctors in Japan (Tezuka himself had a medical degree), and so represent a way to speak to the science-minded students in your class. They also provide an object lesson in "science fiction" in its most literal sense through the extrapolation of biological concepts to philosophical or dramatic effect.

***A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*** by Josh Neufeld

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**Satrapi's account of Iran in the '70s and '80s [serves] as a springboard for students to explore their own conceptions of the nation and its people . . . and to discuss the commonalities involved in being a young person in any culture.**

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A wonderful way to incorporate reportage and creative nonfiction in an accessible and engaging way, Neufeld's Web chronicle of post-Katrina New Orleans (supplemented by a gripping prologue) has recently been published by Pantheon, which is both a plus and a minus. While the print version is slightly revised, expanded, and restructured (and sure to prompt the creation of supporting teaching materials), it's the original digital comic that brilliantly uses the resources of the Web itself, through live links to YouTube video and other resources, to create an immersive reading experience.

(You can access the Web comic at

<http://www.smithmag.net/afterthedeluge/>.) In short, are you looking to cover digital literacy, journalism, and the graphic format into your curriculum? Well, this title allows you to do all three at once, robustly and inspiringly. Occasionally, there are instances of profanity, as *A.D.* presents dialogue verbatim, but this should not deter you from seeking out this landmark work (and perhaps using only excerpts as an alternate approach).

***Persepolis*** by Marjane Satrapi

Even if you've only heard of *Persepolis*, or perhaps seen the critically acclaimed movie version, you might already have a sense of why it has been so widely adopted for curricular use: it's a text that lives and breathes "cross-cultural understanding," it's a compelling historical document, and it's an engaging memoir of youth, all in one. And of course there's nothing wrong with, and lots of things right about, using Satrapi's account of Iran in the '70s and '80s as a springboard for students to explore their own conceptions of the nation and its people—this year, more timely than ever—and to discuss the commonalities involved in being a young person in *any* culture.

However, I'd like to draw attention to additional aspects of the work that should be of particular interest to ELA teachers. Graphic literature is often looked down upon because it doesn't seem to provide that experience of interiority that even third-person prose

novels produce rather effortlessly—that sensation of being fully involved in events and experiencing them vicariously through a point-of-view character. That’s because in comics, we often see the protagonist as an object in our field of vision rather than subject. Interestingly, though, many of the greatest graphic works are in the first person (*Maus*, *American Born Chinese*, *Blankets*, etc.) and typically compensate for this lack of interiority with strategies that leverage the art in subtle ways to convey the narrator’s mental states and emotions. None do this more effectively than *Persepolis*, which employs a deceptively simple cartooning style in the service of a rather sophisticated and nuanced commentary on the events depicted. To this end, Satrapi uses light and dark (often metaphorically), foreground and background, visual symbolism, repetition, asymmetry, synecdoche, and a variety of other devices. The result is that every page, after having its text read, invites a follow-up reading of the images. Sometimes these underscore or embellish the print text, but often they establish a kind of parallel text that carries the deeper themes. Finally, there are one or two dicey passages in *Persepolis*, to be sure, but this has not stopped inspired teachers from exploring the wealth of opportunities described above.

***Watchmen*** by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons

As the best-selling graphic novel of all time, and the source material for a controversial film, these days *Watchmen*’s reputation precedes the actual text by many miles. For that reason, it’s great to know that many educators are recognizing not only the rich thematic context of this 1980s groundbreaker, but also how it extends themes from canon literature in unexpected and vivid ways. One such educator is Pennsylvania teacher John Weaver, who recently wrote of his experiences using *Watchmen* to address timeless ethical questions for [GraphicNovelReporter.com](http://GraphicNovelReporter.com). In addition, this radical reimagining of the cultural archetype known as the superhero is a good place to launch, or continue, an examination of the nature of heroism itself (*Beowulf*, *Henry V*), a topic that

*Watchmen* explores as it relates to patriotism, planetary survival, and justice. In terms of interiority, mentioned regarding *Persepolis* above, *Watchmen* represents an advance in complexity and, for that reason, may be useful to English department heads and curriculum writers as a follow-up title for students who read *Persepolis* in earlier grades. Not only are there multiple point-of-view narrators, but these first-person texts are also often used in juxtaposition with the visual text. A good example is the very first page of the epic, in which journal entries from a character who is not even present are used in counterpoint to the images. You will also want to keep an eye out for how Gibbons’s compositions create additional layers of meaning, and not just on the panel level, but on the page level, as he strategically places certain panels in the left, right, or center. Note: as you may know, *Watchmen* contains bloody violence and some nudity.

***Marvels*** by Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross; ***Kingdom***

***Come*** by Alex Ross and Mark Waid

If *Watchmen* is too intense or “mature” for your students, consider these two titles because, after all, the graphic novel field is now secure enough in its academic and cultural standing that it can welcome the superhero tale back into the fold. Not that these are standard pow-bam slugfests by any means. *Marvels* is a great title with which to teach point-of-view as it revisits key characters and events of the Marvel universe from an “everyman” perspective. *Kingdom Come* is a masterful character study that dramatizes what

happens when central figures in the DC Universe question themselves, their missions, and their values. Although students may be dismayed to read of the deaths of characters such as Lois Lane and Captain Marvel, their familiarity with such characters offers an effective way to build critical thinking skills and to trigger a response to literature by approaching the familiar in an unfamiliar form: students with prior knowledge of these characters, even from other media, can activate that background information to analyze and evaluate how the artists and writers have reinterpreted

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**Students with prior knowledge of these characters, even from other media, can activate that background information to analyze and evaluate how the artists and writers have reinterpreted them.**

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them. (An alternative to both *Watchmen* and these titles is Frank Miller's edgy *The Dark Knight Returns*, a fascinating portrait of Batman in old age.)

*Runaways* (Volume 1) by Brian K. Vaughan, Adrian Alphona, and Takeshi Miyazawa Tapping expertly and imaginatively into adolescent rebelliousness and anxiety, Vaughan posits a group of teens who come to discover that their parents are, in fact, super-villains. Subversive and yet heartfelt, and with pitch-perfect dialogue,

*Runaways* is really a work of YA lit masquerading as a comics series. It's also notable for its gay subtext (later in the series, it is an overt theme), which also happens to include the pejorative use of the term "gay" by one of the characters—another teachable moment. As an alternative to this title, consider the first volume of *Ultimate Spider-Man*. Writer Brian Michael Bendis similarly captures the authentic voice of youth, returning the iconic character back to his roots as a troubled teen who must navigate school, romance, finances, and moral issues—but in an updated, contemporary manner.

*Barefoot Gen* by Keiji Nakazawa

This moving manga account of World War II and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, first published in the early '70s, suggests thematic connections to novel units that may already be in your 9–12 curriculum. These might include works ranging from *The Grapes of Wrath* (a portrait of one family's struggle against staggering adversity) to *All Quiet on the Western Front* (which *Barefoot Gen* echoes in specific scenes, such as the title character carrying the injured for help only to discover once there that he's dead). Curricular connections to nonfiction, such as John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, are easy to make as well, considering that the narrative is based upon creator Nakazawa's real-life experiences. Like the best graphic nonfiction, the author makes use of maps, labels, and footnotes throughout. (You could also build a unit around this title and *The 9/11 Report*, two depictions of devastating national tragedies.) But be "warned": *Barefoot*

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**And this is not a feminist manifesto by someone feeling sorry for herself or angry at the world; it's an immensely readable and honest portrait of someone you want to have as a friend.**

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*Gen* is a no-holds-barred anti-war anthem that is brutally "graphic" in many places and is intended to provoke a visceral reaction in readers. Think Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*. For obvious reasons, this title would also make a fruitful pairing with *Maus*.

*The Amazing "True" Story of a Teenage Single Mom* by Katherine Arnoldi

A flip-test of this memoir by Henfield-winner Arnoldi might not reveal just how powerful a work this is, but it's a true milestone in

the medium. At age seventeen, the author became a mom, and her experiences raising her daughter while holding down factory and waitress jobs—all the time hoping to attend college—speaks to the dreams . . . and anxieties . . . of teens everywhere, arguably male and female alike. And this is not a feminist manifesto by someone feeling sorry for herself or angry at the world; it's an immensely readable and honest portrait of someone you want to have as a friend. Indeed, the humor and authenticity should enable your class to study that most elusive of writing traits—voice. As far as cartooning style is concerned, Arnoldi employs certain stylistic devices that distinguish this work from others' in important ways, while nonetheless staying accessible to students. For example, she often inserts additional text in the panel borders themselves, almost as if they are neon signs "crawling" around the perimeter, and these serve to highlight themes and ideas not addressed explicitly in the main text. Also, by using Arnoldi's work as a model for the autobiographical mode, you may be able to inspire students to write about their own lives; using the medium as a way of opening up self-expression is similar to what Dr. Michael Bitz has done in his famed Comic Book Project.

*Fagin the Jew* by Will Eisner; *The Jungle* by Peter Kuper and Emily Russell

Those who interested in the potential of comics to reimagine canon lit in authentic and compelling ways need look no further than these two titles. In Kuper's stunning, impassioned, and expressionistic adaptation of the Upton Sinclair classic, the original text has been

abridged in order to focus its narrative power; as such, you might want to consider this a supplement to, not a replacement for, the original prose novel. With his take on *Oliver Twist*, Will Eisner goes a step further

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**Tan’s magnificently realized parable of the immigrant experience is a terrific way of proving that wordless doesn’t mean “textless.”**

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and turns Fagin into the point-of-view character, complete with a fleshed-out backstory (and critical deconstruction of anti-Semitism) not included by Dickens. Of course, Eisner left a vast legacy of great graphic novels, so I’m not singling out *Fagin the Jew* as the “best” of these, but rather as a solid starting point for English teachers

unfamiliar with his work.

***Blankets*** by Craig Thompson

I’m following the sole Eisner title on this list with *Blankets* because to me, there are few graphic storytellers who approach his naturalism, expressiveness, and humanism like Craig Thompson. Employing a similar stylistic approach that might be termed the “lyricism of the everyday,” Thompson has created an autobiographical work that speaks directly and memorably to what it means to be a child, adolescent, and young adult. You’ll want to be mindful of the handling of religious issues (a key part of the book), as well as the mild eroticism in the romance that eventually becomes the center of the narrative. Certainly, these topics are found in much literature, including YA lit, but their appearance in visual form can make them problematic, despite Thompson’s treatment of them in a manner that’s consistently tasteful and sensitive. In short, when people want to understand why graphica is worthy of being placed on par with the other arts, this is one of the small handful of titles you give them.

***The Arrival*** by Shaun Tan

You may wonder why I’ve included a wordless graphic novel on an ELA list. Well, for one thing, Tan’s magnificently realized parable of the immigrant experience is a terrific way of proving that wordless doesn’t mean “textless”—far from it, in fact. In purely visual terms, then, *The Arrival* allows your students to analyze story elements, such as mood, pacing, plot, and character development, in a conceptual fashion that they can then transfer to other readings. In addition, Tan’s surrealist allegory provides a platform for discussing issues that may be of particular interest to ELLs and/or students who are recent immigrants. Finally, the wordless format allows you to engage in numerous speaking and listening activities in which students can provide “narrative captions” orally, as an exercise in storytelling.

Unfortunately, I’ve run out of space and there are many other graphic titles that deserve your consideration. But that’s the good news, too: there are simply so many works of graphic literature to choose from. After all, graphica is a medium, not a single genre. Just imagine recommending the top prose titles for 6–12—there’s clearly too much to talk about in a succinct way . . . and that’s a nice problem to have.

*A curriculum developer and consultant, Peter Gutiérrez is an Eisner-nominated comics pro and an NCTE spokesperson in the area of graphic novels. His clients include TOON Books, Sesame Workshop, Sylvan Learning, and Scholastic. He is also a member of NCTE’s Commission on Media and serves on the board of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. Peter writes on comics, film, and pop culture for publications such as School Library Journal, Screen Education, ForeWord Magazine, and The Financial Times.*

## Stories from the Field

**Editors' Note:** We are pleased to introduce a new feature to *The ALAN Review*. **Stories from the Field** invites readers to share a story about young adult literature. This new section will feature brief vignettes (no more than 300 words) from practicing teachers and librarians who would like to share their interactions with students, parents, colleagues, and administrators around young adult literature. Please send your stories to: [jbach@lsu.edu](mailto:jbach@lsu.edu).

### "What did you do?"

#### Matt Skillen

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So, there I was, as the story often goes, sitting at my assigned table during parent–teacher conferences, waiting patiently for my next appointment to arrive. The commons area was abuzz with parents moving from table to table, collecting progress reports on their student's performance. I took a quick look at my appointment schedule and found that my next appointment was with Mr. and Mrs. Fisher, Cassie's mother and father.

On the first day of school, Cassie was the first to enter my room. She collapsed into a chair near my desk and asked, "Do we read in here?"

"Yes, we read in here all the time." I said, slightly taken aback by her question.

Without missing a beat, Cassie said, "Good luck with that. I hate reading."

Soon after our first exchange, Cassie found a copy of *Speak* in my classroom library. She asked if

she could borrow it for a while. I told her she could keep it as long as she needed. I watched her carry that book for weeks from class to class. And, every once in a while, I even caught her reading a page here and there.

Later that same semester, Cassie's mother contacted me to schedule a parent–teacher conference. We arranged a time during the evening set aside by the district for such meetings, and there I sat, waiting.

As Mr. and Mrs. Fisher approached my table, I could sense that Mrs. Fisher was quite frustrated about something. After Mrs. Fisher politely took a chair at my table, she waited a moment to collect her thoughts and said, "What did you do? Do you know that I have caught Cassie up past her bedtime, with a light on in her room, reading? She said it was *your* fault!"

### Reading the Twilight Series through Student Responses

#### Kathleen Richard

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I have not read all the *Twilight* books, but my students have. My disjointed "reading" of the series occurs through their response logs, book talks, and conversations in class. I may jump from Bella in biology to her bloodthirstiness when she becomes a vampire to scenes of Jacob's pining for his unrequited love.

Female students say they love Edward: he is, they say, their fantasy guy. They go on about how roman-

tic he is, how beautiful; they do say they know he's not real. From my reading of their reading, I think the real fantasy is that more than one powerful, dangerous guy loves and pursues Bella. The young female reader becomes the beautiful, desirable, besotted Bella when they read her. Perhaps the few male students who are reading want what Edward has and what Bella wants; if not, there is enough adventure, blood, and fighting to keep them interested.

I did read the first book in the series, but was not interested enough to complete them. I read Edward as the "bad guy," as one of my male students did. I was

amused that the Native American love-interest was a werewolf.

I go back to my own reading of *Twilight* and my original idea of Edward as the bad guy when a student quotes Edward in her reading journal, "I'm not always the most dangerous thing out there. . . ." The student writes, ". . . I don't know what could be more dangerous than a vampire in Forks." Sometimes, I feel like responding, "I don't know, how about a family of them? Or traveling bands of them? Or a vampire having a baby?"

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### **Call for Proposals: NCTE Theory and Research into Practice (TRIP) Book Series**

The NCTE Books Program invites proposals for its TRIP series (Theory and Research into Practice). These books are single-authored and focus on a single topic, targeting a specified educational level (elementary, middle, or secondary). Each book will offer the following: solid theoretical foundation in a given subject area within English language arts; exposure to the pertinent research in that area; practice-oriented models designed to stimulate theory-based application in the reader's own classroom. The series has an extremely wide range of subject matter; past titles include *Genre Theory*, *Unlocking Shakespeare's Language*, *Code-Switching*, and *Writing about Literature*. For detailed submission guidelines, please visit the NCTE website at <http://www.ncte.org/write/books>. Proposals to be considered for the TRIP series should include a short review of the theory and research, as well as examples of classroom practices that can be adapted to the teaching level specified. Proposals should be submitted through NCTE's Web-based manuscript submission and review system, Editorial Manager, at <http://www.editorialmanager.com/nctebp/>.

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## Welcome and Thanks to the 2008–2009 ALAN State Representatives

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