

Pushing Back the Shadows of Reading:

A Mother and Daughter Talk of YA Novels

We start this column with two literacy memories, located about 10 years apart, both featuring a well-worn den sofa as a site of reading. The first was very recent, a few months ago as the two of us—mother and teenage daughter—sat knee-to-knee on the sofa, recalling the YA books that had made the biggest marks on us. Haviland, a high school senior, frowned as she recalled some of her middle and high school reading experiences.

“School never asks us to read interesting books,” she said. “They shove *The Great Gatsby* in our faces and tell us it’s one of the best pieces of literature ever written, and then, we’re like, ‘If this is the good stuff, what’s the bad stuff . . .?’”

Her voice lilted upward in the way of her YouTube generation, hands extended in exasperation. Teri chuckled. As a teen, she had enjoyed *The Great Gatsby*, but it was because the movie came out the year she read it, and she was old enough to remember when Robert Redford was more hot than distinguished.

But for all the *Great Gatsbys* and *Huckleberry Finns* Haviland didn’t enjoy reading, there were others that she did: Lowry’s *The Giver*, Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. We spent an enjoyable afternoon making lists of books she loved and reminiscing about their stories.

Leap back to ten years earlier, when, as a eight-year old, Haviland sat on the floor watching television while Teri read on the sofa. A public service announcement came on—something about how books freed the imagination. Haviland abruptly shifted her position and muttered an audible *hmpf*.

“What is it?” Teri asked.

“I don’t know why they say books are the key to the imagination,” she answered.

“What do you mean?”

Haviland shifted again and paused before answering. “Well, let’s say my imagination is a field and the only way I can cross it is with books. It will take me a whole lot longer to cross that field reading and writing than if you’ll just let me go.”

In many ways, the narrative of our family is the journey between those two memories—the frustrated second-grader who saw books as a shackle that limited her imagination and the frustrated twelfth-grader who saw school as a too-frequent shackle that limited her access to meaningful reading experiences. If we had to categorize our family narrative as a genre, it would be an adventure tale, one in which a family—encouraged and frequently led by a plucky child—navigates treacherous terrain to find its place in the world. In first grade, Haviland was identified as having dyslexia. When she described books as a chain that held her back from the fertile grounds of her imagination, she wasn’t merely deploying a metaphor. She was articulating the conditions of her world. Reading—or at least the kind of reading that she was instructed to engage in during school—enslaved her. Her narrative is how she battled back against a narrow definition of school texts to become a young woman who not only loves to read, but is a 21st-century scripiter of texts.

The key, she says now, was being given the opportunity to read “actual, good books,” not the simplistic “preschooler” books that dominated much of

her early school years or focused on phonics to the exclusion of quality writing. The first books she remembers enjoying were Dahl's *The BFG* and *The Witches*, well-written texts that appealed to her sense of humor. She read books in a variety of ways—at bedtime as read-alouds with her parents, in shared readings with her tutor, on her own, and sometimes with CDs or tapes. When available, she often watched in tandem the book and film versions of the same story; the

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Harry Potter books were enjoyed in this manner. By engaging in multiple narrative forms, she developed a keen critic's eye (and ear) for storytelling and an awareness of the affordances and constraints of each media and their impact on creative decision making. This rich narrative environment proved fertile ground for a love of story

and a curiosity about the world that drove her desire to read.

In retrospect, she's come to believe that this passion for story was key in diminishing the implications of her dyslexia. "I never saw dyslexia as really stifling, at least not in my later school years," Haviland noted. "Once I actually learned how to read and how to enjoy reading, it wasn't a big deal. I read all the time."

And indeed, she does. Stacked on the floor beside the sofa are the spoils from her most recent trip to the bookstore: Austen and Winters' *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, Wasserman's *Crashed*, Brown's *The Lost Symbol*. *The Education of Little Tree* might have been a book she endured as a class requirement, but these self-selected texts are waiting to be savored.

For this column, Haviland identified YA novels that were pivotal in her personal reading experiences, the ones that throughout her teen years pulled her into the stories and impelled her to reflect upon and—at times—to revise her thinking about texts, reading, and ways of making meaning in the world. Of the books we discuss here, one was an assigned class reading; the others came from recommendations by YA book aficionados, Internet exchanges with readers who share our regard for graphic novels and manga,

and our own ramblings through bookstore aisles. In discussing these texts, we realized that most of them have a common element: an emphasis on visual means of communicating story. This characteristic is displayed through formats that combine image and print; through highly imagistic or visual language; and through an attention to the appearance of print text on the page, including typography and layout. It isn't surprising to us that a 21st-century creator of text would find appeal in books that transgress 20th-century assumptions about what forms novels should take. In addition, these books are just flat-out good reads.

Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson

Anderson's book, published ten years ago, deals with the large societal topics of racism, violence, ostracism, of being silenced versus choosing silence, and of learning when and how to speak, all within a high school context. The protagonist Melinda is smart, troubled, and socially withdrawn; she finds high school a difficult and inexplicable space as she struggles to make sense of her experiences. Part of the book's appeal rests in its depiction of resistance—on the part of both teens and adults—to imposed constraints. While it is well-written, the characters sometimes skid over the line into stereotypes: Mr. Neck, the Social Studies teacher, is almost one-sidedly obstinate; Mr. Freeman, the art teacher, is rebellious and nontraditional. But in Melinda, Anderson has created a strong first-person narrator with an appealing voice. Her disaffection plays out in the quick and observant sketches she makes of her world. The writing is engaging, and while this book does not incorporate visual elements, as do many of the other texts on this list, the depiction of art as an outlet for emotional expression that has a place in school is a welcomed stance.

Abarat by Clive Barker

Abarat is the first of what Barker plans as a series of five books; so far, only the second, *Abarat: Days of Magic, Nights of War*, has been published. The appeal of Barker's series is two-fold: first, the story of restless Candy Quakenbush who, tired of living in a town most famous for its chicken-rendering plant, sets out on a fantastical journey that takes her to the islands of Abarat with its curious inhabitants and requisite dangers; second, the accompanying illustrations, also cre-

ated by Barker. As a protagonist, Candy is engaging; she is someone readers want to journey alongside. But the written story is only one part of this developing series' attraction; the paintings are a vital part of the intrigue of *Abarat*, both from a reader's and a writer's standpoint. To the reader, the paintings, done in oil and printed in color, add a bold layer to the text. Careful readers will spend time studying the lines and textures of the illustrations. But the paintings also add to the intrigue of Barker as a writer. Readers whose own creative impulses start with image may find Barker's work doubly stimulating.

Crank by Ellen Hopkins

Hopkins, who also authored the gripping *Burned* and *Impulse*, is an appealing author because of her ability to present very serious topics in visually and lyrically compelling ways. *Crank* is the story of a troubled, drug-addicted teen who becomes pregnant as the result of a rape. Such heavy material typically would be conveyed as conventional prose, but Hopkins breaks form by telling her story in a series of poems. The effect is highly visual on two levels: the imagistic poetic language focuses the reader's attention with sharp, succinct writing, and the visual arrangement of the poems on the page emphasizes elements of the story that might otherwise be lost in the flow of prose. If this book had been written in prose, it might have risked being just another angst-ridden teenage story. However, Hopkins's decision to tell it in verse increases its intensity and emotional pull.

You Don't Know Me by David Klass

From the first page, the reader knows that the narrator, 14-year-old John, is provocative, sarcastic, funny, wickedly smart, and probably wounded. Many of John's daily struggles are common to the high school experience—his desire to impress the beautiful girl, to get through algebra class. But John also struggles with abuse from his mother's boyfriend and the consequences of being an outsider in school. The well-developed and personable voice of the narrator is behind the appeal of this book. Through John, Klass effectively plays with language and the reader/writer relationship. The book does feature some stereotypical characters—the sweet but unattractive girl, the stern principal—but given the narrator's strong voice, it nevertheless works.

Castle Waiting by Linda Medley

This book combines into one volume Medley's Eisner Award-winning comic book series that takes up the question of what happens to all the people living in a fairytale castle once the prince and princess ride off to the accompaniment of birds and choirs. The series is both humorous and wise. When Sleeping Beauty, oblivious to the 100-year slumber her subjects have endured on her behalf, leaves to find her destiny, the castle inhabitants stay behind and play host to a string of guests with their own wild and involving tales, most notably Sister Peace, the bearded nun who once worked at a circus. The characters are complex, and the stories are imaginative and well planned. As genres, comics and graphic novels are still dominated by male authors, and female characters are often under-realized and over-sexualized. Medley's post-modern feminist work is welcome fare.

The Host by Stephanie Meyer

Although not promoted as a YA novel, this book will find plenty of young adult readers courtesy of their attraction to Meyer's *Twilight* series. *The Host* is a better-written and slightly more intellectual narrative than the author's vampire saga. While the *Twilight* characters can be two-dimensional, the characters in this science fiction text are more realistic, easier to relate to, and part of a more suspenseful plot. The "host" refers to humans whose bodies and minds are taken over by space creatures; in this way, the book references *The Body Snatchers* films. As humans begin to understand the danger, they go into hiding, but have to stay alert to the possibility of infiltrating aliens among them. As is common to the genre, the book can serve as the impetus for a variety of sociopolitical conversations.

ttyl series by Lauren Myracle

Myracle's *ttyl* books ask readers to consider how narrative might look if instant messaging is accepted as a creative and viable storytelling format. Written entirely as a lengthy set of IMs between three girls (complete with the visual depiction of a computer screen), Myracle's series manages to create accessible, entertaining characters and a captivating plotline. The books are funny and a bit transgressive in both the humor and the format. Part of the books' allure

is the author's ability to paint portraits of the characters through dialogue, punctuation, and the layout of the texts. Despite the conceit that the characters are continually seated in front of computer screens, the reader is able to envision the events they describe to each other. As nontraditional texts, the books nevertheless serve as a testament to the power of good storytelling: even in IM form, compelling stories shine through. The characters—zoegirl, mad maddie, and SnowAngel—play off each other well as they confront such topics as sex, relocation, and rebellion.

Death Note by Tsugumi Ohbi and Takeshi Obata
Manga doesn't always have the reputation for complexity, but this series goes beyond easy depictions of good and evil. The plot revolves around supernatural notebooks used by gods of death to organize their final plans for people on earth; the persons whose names are inscribed in the notebooks are condemned to die. When a high school student named Light finds one of the notebooks, he decides to use his new power for good by killing murderers and other unredeemable criminals. Questions of right and wrong and good and evil form the series' moral narrative. A major shortcoming, however, is the lack of substantive female characters; the only significant female character is used primarily as comic relief. Despite this serious drawback, the series allows for a contemporary reframing of the "power corrupts" discussion.

Bone by Jeff Smith

For this review, we refer to the 1300-page single volume edition of Smith's long-running comic book series. But to call *Bone* "a comic book series" assumes a certain understanding of comic books that this work upends. Smith treats in comic style a narrative suitable for an adult novel. The book follows two sets of protagonists—one group is comprised of the three exiled Bone cousins; the other consists of Thorn and Grandma Rose—all of whom are engaged in a battle with an evil lord. The story is both humorous and intricate; not even the mischievous Rat Creatures, who serve as comic relief, are throw-away characters. Smith smartly combines drawing styles that develop the nuances of the narrative. Thorn and Grandma Rose, who are humans, are drawn in a more realistic style, while the Bone cousins could have stepped from Walt Kelly's Okefenokee Swamp. Both Thorn and

Grandma Rose are portrayed as strong, resourceful, and complete female characters who are intrinsic and necessary to the story.

Uglies series by Scott Westerfield

In *Uglies*, *Pretties*, *Specials*, and the related *Extras*, Westerfield has created a series that appeals to teenage interests in science fiction, dystopias, resistance to authority, and the tension between wanting and not wanting to be part of the beautiful crowd. The series is set in a society in which plastic surgery at 16 to achieve physical perfection and conformity has become a required and much-anticipated cultural rite. However, as the female protagonist Tally discovers, being perfect comes with its own set of controls. This book works as a suspense story and as social commentary, in part because both the characters and the futuristic details seem plausible. Tally is rendered as a believable teenager; her responses to situations are credible. Interesting connections can be made between *Uglies* and *The Great Gatsby*—both deal with societies in which abundance and beauty are prized over an awareness of complexity and consequences.

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As we reflected upon the list, our conversation turned from what it was like to be a reader of these books to what it was like to be a young writer who used these books as mentor texts. Like teenage writers a generation ago who drew inspiration from the works of others, Haviland noted that her generation also looks to books when they craft their works. "In the case of reading traditional books, I sometimes borrow a style of writing or a voice. And when I'm reading manga, I might try to mimic a certain layout. These books become references for me."

But unlike teenage writers a generation ago, who wrote with pencils and typewriters, Haviland's generation has the option to draw from an assortment of media to craft narratives.

"We are 21st-century students with 21st-century taste in reading styles and books," she added. "We are making movies on YouTube. We put our work on Deviant Art. We go out and make our own stuff; we are no longer bound by other people's books or television shows for our ideas. We can go to conventions and create our own plays. We can draw and write and put it out there for people to see. We have a worldwide audience. That's how we communicate now."

In retrospect, Haviland would revise the har-rumphing statement she made when she was eight—books *can* be a key to the imagination. But it might be that it is a different kind of imagination, one that works in multiple genres and media and acutely appeals to the visual sense of the reader as well as the literary. And it just might be an imagination that makes it easier to transgress the bounds of learning labels.

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Haviland Holbrook is a high school senior and plans to enter a film studies program upon graduation.

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