

Stories from the Field

Confessions of a Bibliophile

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The innocuous brown box sat on the table in front of me, taped on both ends. I glanced around me. In all directions, teachers, librarians, professors, and young adult book lovers, like children at Christmas, ripped into similar looking boxes, delight clear on their faces. I could hear laughter and excited voices talking about books and authors and plots and characters. I sighed, my face creeping into the beginning of a disbeliever's smile.

For anyone who has not attended an ALAN conference, it's a little like going to Disney World for the first time (another first for me on this trip, since the conference was held at one of the Disney resorts). There's a little disbelief, a little magic, and a whole lot of excitement that originates somewhere in the pit-of-the-stomach region, just below the heart. But then again, I am, after all, a high school English teacher.

I know it must seem a little trite, because anyone who has heard of the ALAN Conference has heard of the numerous young adult books one comes home with (for free, might I add), but the books were amazing! Not only did I get books from authors that I desperately adored, but I also discovered quite a few authors with whom my love affair had not even begun!

I slowly pulled the tape away from the opening of the box and opened the flaps, prolonging the excite-

ment as long as possible. Inside, stacked to the very brim, books of all sizes and types waited to be cracked. My fingers twitched in anticipation of the softly rippled texture of the pages.

Aside from the load of new books, the environment—riddled with people who make their living in books—still resonates, weeks later. Every half an hour or so, a new panel of authors took the stage, discussing topics related to the theme of “Looking for the Real Me.” I listened to them speak about their books and their topics and I thought about how I could take all of this back to my classroom.

I am an English teacher to a group of reluctant, rebellious, ridiculously lovable and waiting-for-the-right-book teenagers in a small inner city charter school for students with ADD, ADHD, and Asperger's Syndrome. Until this year, we didn't have textbooks, and our library consisted of class sets of abridged classic novels. Not the way to inspire struggling students to read. Before attending the ALAN conference, I had already decided on and implemented independent reading in my classroom, using a classroom library made up of the meager young adult book collection of two poor and relatively new teachers. It was pitiful. I needed inspiration, support, and BOOKS!

It was like Mary Poppins's box of books. I looked around. Everyone was stacking all of their books on the tables and sorting them. I turned around to the ladies behind me, two librarians from Colorado, peeking at me from behind their own stacks. They must have seen the look of confusion on my face.

“Just sort out the authors that will be here today, and put the rest back in the box,” said the younger one. “First time?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, if you keep out the books for the authors that are speaking today, you can have them signed after they speak.”

I gasped. “Really? That is great!”

“Yeah, the kids tend to get really excited when they see that the books are signed to them.”

Halfway through a day of authors and book signings, the conference temporarily broke into half-hour mini-sessions on various topics related to young adult literature in the classroom. Over two days, I attended two different sessions on using young adult literature to inspire writing, a current passion of mine. I watched. I listened. I took notes.

I met my benefactor, the man responsible for the Gallo Grant, Dr. Donald Gallo, who is not only an advocate for ALAN, but also an advocate for young teachers who advocate young adult literature in their classrooms. For two days, the attendees unabashedly shared in our love for young adult literature.

Three weeks after I returned from the conference, I stand behind my desk in my classroom while a trio of tenth graders sorts through the new books that I brought back with me. The books have been sitting there for two weeks now, and I briefly talked about them when I put them out, but like shy children, slowly making friends, it has taken my students this long to really bury their hands in the pages of these new books. A boy, shaggy hair falling in front of his face, cracks open Silver Phoenix by Cindy Pon.

“Hey, look at this!” he says, holding the book out to his friends. “She actually signed it to our school! That’s pretty cool, actually. It says ‘Keep dreaming.’ Wow.”

Three pairs of hands dig into the bin of books next to my desk. I hear them exclaiming with surprise and delight when they find a signed copy. I hear them reading the summaries, and I see them walking away with books tucked under their arms, like the precious treasures I have been claiming them to be all along.

The Power of Student Choice

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I have taught a Young Adult Literature course for high school sophomores for the past eight years, and I have witnessed a profound shift in my students’ attitudes about reading. My room is filled with 15 bookcases overflowing with young adult titles, and the course is centered on the philosophy that we must provide students the opportunity to choose what to read. This is a radical idea for most English teachers, as we all too often feel the need to make sure our students have read the classics, to prepare them for the world of literary illusions and the high-stakes testing of the Advanced Placement program. But what we fail to understand is that when we force students to read texts that they cannot relate to and see no value in, they do not read them.

To combat this issue, I allow student choice; students choose what they want to read and then blog about their novels weekly on our wiki page. They are engaging in real-world skills. After all, as adults, we read novels and then talk to our friends about them; why should our students be any different? I have had the unique experience to team with a local author, Patrick Jones, who has written six novels for young adults. My students each select one of his novels to read, then participate in a student-led discussion about the themes, issues, and conflicts each present. After processing the novels, Patrick visits my classes and shares his motivations, inspirations, and expertise with my students. By not forcing my students to all read the same text, I provide them with the opportunity to find a novel that speaks to them, that shows them alternative realities, and encourages them to become readers—not only for learning, but for life.

Remembering Brian Jacques

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I don’t remember precisely when I first found a book by Brian Jacques in my school’s library. I remember I was young, and not yet sophisticated enough to guess that some of the letters in his last name might be silent.

I took an immediate liking to everything about the world Jacques created. Each new detail was met with my wide-eyed approval. Mice and moles in an abbey?

Of course. Not only did it make sense—it made me unspeakably happy.

I crawled inside these books and lived there for several years. I read on the bus; I read between classes; I read at night when I was supposed to be in bed. Although I had some close friends, the cliquish atmosphere at my small school was hard on me. I liked to spend our recess period in the library alone—reading in a beanbag chair.

I wrote Jacques a letter once, and faced the impossible task of introducing myself to someone I already knew. I awkwardly announced in the second sentence that my parents “had never been divorced or anything.” I just wanted him to know. I told him for the same reason anyone tells anyone anything—because I thought he would care.

When I was 13, I met Jacques at a bookstore signing. He was wonderful. He answered questions and recited text from memory. He told us a story about

visiting a class of “mixed infants,” and then paused to joke, “I’d like a pound of mixed infants, please!” He took my dad’s hand when demonstrating the mannerisms of the kind old men on whom he’d based the mole characters: men who addressed everyone as “My dear” and “My beauty.”

When it was my turn to meet him, he looked at me and declared, “You have *black hair!*” I was speechless. I handed him my favorite book, *Mossflower*, to be autographed, and he cheerfully threw an arm around my shoulder for a photo.

It’s been more than ten years, and I haven’t read about mice and moles in a very long time. I’ve gone back to school to be a journalist, and spend most of my time in the nonfiction section these days. I thought about writing Jacques again. I wish I had. I would have told him what I’m doing now. I would have thanked him for making my life better. And I know he would have cared.