

Bringing Fantasy and Science Fiction into the Classroom

Young Adult literature (YAL), like its base audience, is a fickle and ever-changing genre, for it is solely dependent upon reader interest for survival, and where teens are concerned, unpredictability is the norm. There are certainly some common themes, and it's generally the case that the stories focus on one or more relatable young adult protagonists, but the tales themselves may vary much like the eclectic interests of their readers. As the YAL genre continues to grow from its modest beginnings following the Second World War to its unprecedented popularity today, we have to examine what it is that makes certain YAL titles so popular, and what it is we can do to harness this opportunity to increase adolescent interest in reading.

It was the 1967 release of S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* that initially brought about great change in the way we look at literature as a means of exploring the adolescent experience, but over the years since then, YAL has emerged as a booming legitimate genre often boasting its own colossal section apart from adult fiction and children's literature in almost all modern libraries throughout the country.

With that in mind, I started considering my experiences with reading as a teenager because I grew up alongside this trend in literature. While reflecting, I was able

to recall seeing a few fellow students reading outside of class, but couldn't initially pinpoint what finally caused me to begin reading on my own. And that's because for me, this never happened. What was the major stumbling block, then, that prevented me from wanting to read for pleasure prior to graduation? I had little difficulty reading the books assigned for my Advanced Placement English language arts classes, but beyond getting the grades, I had little desire to read anything beyond the confines of an academic setting.

So, I took a look at what I currently read, which falls mainly into the fantasy and science fiction genres of both adult and YAL, and compared that with what I was exposed to in high school. I realized that not one course had included so much as a mention of either. In fact, I wasn't even aware that these genres really interested me because I'd only been exposed to one such book in my entire academic experience, even prior to high school.

After being unable to come up with any fantasy titles within the curriculum, I stretched it a bit further to include science fiction novels like one of my recent favorites, *Ender's Game* (1985) by Orson Scott Card, but still nothing. I wonder, does this mean these two genres are simply too poorly written or lacking in literary quality to be studied in preparation for the state assessments that were and

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still are administered at my residence in Upstate New York or the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) exams of the near future? Or is it that they are simply too difficult for students to relate to, pushing the already reluctant reader further from text than many already are? There must be some good reason why these genres are rarely, if at all, taught beyond the 8th grade, which was the last time I

can recall reading anything of the sort within a classroom setting.

Then what titles should teens be reading? I took a look at the CCSSI for English Language Arts and Literacy. Because 44 of the 50 states have formally adopted them, and will therefore be guided by these standards in the very near future. After researching the goals and the suggested means of CCSSI implementation, I am convinced that the lack of literary equity among genres now taught is set to grow even further from where it is today.

The literary framework laid out by the CCSSI spells out a percentage of literary texts to be taught versus informational texts, with a sliding scale as students' progress closer toward graduation and "college and career readiness." According to the CCSSI's adoption of the National Assessment Governing Board's *Reading Framework for the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress*, students should be reading 45% literary texts by the eighth grade, while the remaining 55% should be informational in nature (National Assessment Governing Board, 2008). What's more shocking is that by the 12th grade, these percentages are to have shifted to 30% literary and 70% informational. Granted, these numbers are meant to encompass readings done across content areas, but it still seems plausible that this shift away from literary reading will only further restrict the variety and flexibility of literary readings beyond the unofficially required classics.

The CCSSI does contain an exemplar of acceptable stories to be taught in ELA classrooms. There are two lists that span grades 9–12 that together include 35 titles; however, the closest this list gets to recognizing

fantasy or science fiction is the existence of Homer's *The Odyssey*. Don't get me wrong, there are great titles on this list, ranging from *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) by Ray Bradbury to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1935), with all the generic classics in between, but in terms of texts that today's students are likely to identify with, texts that will help them really learn to love reading, this list is insufficient.

Thankfully, the CCSSI is not bold enough to demand that specific titles *must* be taught. In fact, the standards clarify that teachers are "free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). However, it seems as though the gradual increase to the mandated 70% concentration on informational texts will likely strangle title selection within the remaining 30%. As fewer literary texts are allowed in the classroom, the chances for variety in genre will shrink significantly unless teachers see the importance of teaching beyond the traditional canon to include YAL and its subgenres of fantasy and science fiction.

Then what titles should teens be reading? If we simply go by the CCSSI's list, we'll be limited to a very narrow field of literature, and I realized when pondering this conundrum that something was clearly missing when the educators, district administrators, and educational gurus responsible for the CCSSI were deliberating . . . teen input.

One might look at what is deemed appropriate by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), who are behind the CCSSI, but in the end, students have to learn to enjoy reading (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). And as a former student and current high school teacher, I can easily say that the majority of students do not learn to love reading through informational texts, or even the classics, no matter how educationally beneficial they may be. In order to really get students to love reading, we have to first identify their interests and how these translate into the reading of literature for pleasure.

So what do young adults *like* to read? To answer this, I took a look at the nominees for the Young Adult

Library Services Association 2011 Top Ten list. (See these titles in the sidebar on p. 00; the list and other information are also available at <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/teenreading/teenstopten/teenstopten.cfm>). Based on votes from teen readers across the country, this list gave me a better idea of where teen readers stand on the issue. More than half of these 25 titles fall into the categories of either fantasy or science fiction (American Library Association, 2011).

One example from this list is *The Lost Gate* (2011) from author Orson Scott Card, a 2008 recipient of the annual Margaret A. Edwards Award from the Young Adult Library Services Association; this award honors authors who have made a “significant and lasting contributions to writing for teens” (Young Adult Library Services Association, 2011). This teen-nominated list also includes the novel *I Am Number Four* (2010) by Pittacus Lore, whose story found its way to the big screen in early 2011. Also making the list was *New York Times* bestselling author Suzanne Collins with her book *Mockingjay* (2010), the final book in the popular Hunger Games series.

Another *New York Times* bestselling author on the list boasting unquestionable accolades is James Patterson with his book *Angel: A Maximum Ride Novel* (2011). Patterson is the author of 19 *New York Times* bestselling novels and is traditionally better known in adult reader circles, but according to Bickmore (2012), he is just one of many adult novelists to have recently shifted styles to attract the ever-growing young adult audience as well. So there seems to be a slight disconnect between what young adults are interested in reading, and what adults deem educationally appropriate for them to read. But isn’t the idea to get them to read more, to learn to love and enjoy reading?

The official purpose of the CCSSI is to “build upon the most advanced current thinking about preparing all students for success in college and their careers.” So it must be that the titles selected by teens from across the country do not contain the literary elements and rigor of the more traditional texts, because it would otherwise make sense to choose some of the teen-approved titles as examples of qualifying texts at the secondary level. So I guess what needs to be determined are the characteristics of an educationally sound piece of literature. Surely we can conclude that the classics such as William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*,

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), as well as a number of other novels listed by the CCSSI fit this mold. But what do they all have in common? Or, more important, what is it that the CCSSI deems important that students learn while reading?

Young Adult Library Services 25 Nominees for the 2011 Top Ten List

- **Bachorz, Pam.** *Drought*. Egmont USA. 2011.
- **Beam, Cris.** *I Am J*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers. 2011.
- **Beaudoin, Sean.** *You Killed Wesley Payne*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers. 2011.
- **Black, Holly, and Justine Larbalestier.** *Zombies vs. Unicorns*. Simon & Schuster/Margaret K. McElderry Books. 2010.
- **Card, Orson Scott.** *The Lost Gate*. Tor Books. 2011.
- **Clare, Cassandra.** *The Clockwork Angel*. Simon & Schuster/Margaret K. McElderry. 2010.
- **Collins, Suzanne.** *Mockingjay*. Scholastic. 2010.
- **Collins, Yvonne.** *Love, Inc.* Disney/Hyperion. 2011.
- **Condie, Ally.** *Matched*. Penguin/Dutton. 2010.
- **Cremer, Andrea.** *Nightshade*. Penguin/Philomel. 2010.
- **Fitzpatrick, Becca.** *Crescendo*. Simon & Schuster Children’s. 2010.
- **Grant, Michael.** *Lies*. HarperCollins/Katherine Tegen Books. 2010.
- **Hawkins, Rachel.** *Demonglass*. Disney/Hyperion. 2011.
- **Hawkins, Rachel.** *Hex Hall*. Disney/Hyperion. 2010.
- **Kagawa, Julie.** *The Iron King*. Harlequin. 2010.
- **Lore, Pittacus.** *I Am Number Four*. HarperCollins. 2010.
- **Moore, Peter.** *Red Moon Rising*. Disney/Hyperion. 2011.
- **Nelson, Jandy.** *The Sky Is Everywhere*. Penguin/Dial Books for Young Readers. 2010.
- **Oliver, Lauren.** *Before I Fall*. HarperCollins/HarperTeen. 2010.
- **O’Neal, Ellis.** *The False Princess*. Egmont USA. 2011.
- **Patterson, James.** *Angel: A Maximum Ride Novel*. Little, Brown & Company. 2011.
- **Pearce, Jackson.** *Sisters Red*. Little, Brown and Company. 2010.
- **Smith, Cynthia Leitich.** *Blessed*. Candlewick Press. 2011.
- **Westerfeld, Scott.** *Behemoth*. Simon Pulse. 2010.
- **White, Kiersten.** *Paranormalcy*. HarperCollins/HarperTeen. 2010. (American Library Association, 2011)

It might be advantageous to choose novels that students desire to read, novels that might spark an interest in independent reading beyond the classroom.

The CCSSI specific to my native New York suggests that secondary-level students read a minimum of 25 books or the equivalent per year across all content areas (The University of the State of New York, Regents of the University, 2005). As stated before, the standards do not require that specific literary texts be taught, but do go into detail regarding necessary skills students should acquire along the way. Students should be able to . . .

- “Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.”
- “Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).”
- “Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)”
- “Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.”

(National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010)

This is certainly not a complete list of all of the learning standards, but the aforementioned are most clearly related to the reading aspect, and also seem to indicate a freedom to choose from any available novel that might exhibit the opportunities to examine these

elements of reading comprehension and analysis. So there does appear to be room for flexibility in terms of novel selection on the part of the teacher, since there is no “official” list of required novels associated with the standards of learning.

Surely a teacher has to choose novels that encompass the previously stated literary elements. However, it might be advantageous to choose novels that students desire to read, novels that might spark an interest in independent reading beyond the classroom. By being in touch with what the students want to read, teachers will more than likely meet less resistance along the way from reluctant readers while still satisfying the learning standards and preparing students for the world of higher learning and careers.

According to University of Southern Florida writer Vickie Chachere, fellow student Courtney Pollard researched this very topic of young adult content quality, and her “analysis of classic books and hot-selling young adult fiction was featured in the University of Southern Florida’s Undergraduate Research Symposium” (Chachere, 2011). In her research, Pollard concluded that 60% of novels chosen by young adult readers fall into the category of fantasy or science fiction. So she looked into what the aforementioned genres might have to offer young readers and concluded that they “might be set in made-up worlds with imagined creatures and beings, but the conflicts and challenges faced by their characters reflect real-world issues: the classic struggle with authority, the frustrations of growing up and family problems” (Chachere, 2011). These are the same issues seen within the traditional fiction novels being pushed in the classroom.

Pollard’s conclusion about relevant problems and characters placed in distant worlds may be one of the most appealing aspects of the fantasy and science fiction genres as they apply to young adult readers. Many teens struggle with identity, parental absence, and a number of other difficult adolescent issues. For some, a book that tackles those themes head on using a realistic and identifiable character is a great way of dealing with those issues. However, it might be that the roundabout way many of the fantasy and science fiction novels tend to take on these same issues—by placing them in a safe and distant place—is a more appealing way for teens to deal with them. They might also see an advantage in reading these genres, since reading a particular title doesn’t necessarily identify

them to others as struggling with this issue or that.

Keep in mind that I'm not suggesting we solely teach fantasy and sci-fi and do away completely with the classics that have proven to be ageless masterpieces of great literature. I am simply arguing that exposure to a supplement of more relevant young adult novels might further encourage students to read outside of the classroom. If students are reading more and learn to enjoy it, they will naturally improve in their abilities to interpret and comprehend textual information, making them better equipped to tackle the classic readings unofficially deemed necessary for literary mastery.

I was never personally a lover of reading until exposed to age-appropriate material that I found interesting and relevant, which, unfortunately for me, did not occur until after high school when I came across C. S. Lewis's Space Trilogy, Raymond E. Feist's *The Magician* (1993), and R. A. Salvatore's Dark Elf Trilogy (1992), to name a few.

But what if teachers don't really know how to teach fantasy or science fiction novels? Some educators may not be familiar with these growing genres and might be uncomfortable tackling uncharted educational territory. Fortunately, this issue has been recognized, and books have been published with this very thought in mind. One such book, titled *Teaching Fantasy Novels: From The Hobbit to Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2003) by Phyllis J. Perry, would be a great resource for any teacher looking to get into teaching fantasy. A Voice of Youth Advocates review on Barnesandnoble.com stated that "Teachers at a loss as to how to teach fantasy literature in the existing curriculum will delight in this book. Each of the 20 referenced books is keyed through meaningful and enjoyable activities to the NCTE/IRA Language Arts Standards" (<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/teaching-the-fantasy-novel-phyllis-j-perry/1005636248>). Another excellent aid in discovering how to incorporate science fiction novels into the classroom can be found in Gary Raham's *Teaching Science Fact with Science Fiction* (2004), which suggests a variety of classroom activities linked to relevant science fiction novels. This book could create a scenario for teachers to not only pique student interest in reading, but might also reach across the curriculum to help students connect with their science classes.

Knowing that there are tools out there to assist in

the transition from purely classic and general fiction to at least some of the novels students really want to read leaves few excuses to refuse this call. But school districts and teachers need to step up and do what's best for their students in the midst of this new and well-intended yet restrictive educational legislation. If the goal is to get students to enjoy reading more, then I suggest that educators and librarians alike expose them to a wider variety of student-recommended novels. Clearly, many students already enjoy them, since they're the voices who recommended them. And if the goal is to get more students to pass the CCSS exams, which would demonstrate competent college and career readiness as it applies to the English language arts and literacy, then it can be concluded that students will still need to be encouraged to read more than what they are currently reading, especially at their leisure. If they are like I was; it was my exposure to fantasy/sci-fi that finally made me a reader.

By combining these 2 goals, and realizing the substantial young adult fixation with the fantasy and science fiction genres, it seems only fitting that the local curriculums shift to include these titles; doing so is likely to achieve and improve teen literacy, both in the classroom and out. And in a time when literary fiction title selection in the classroom seems to be shrinking, it becomes all the more important that fantasy/sci-fi be offered to adolescent students. What better antidote to the often dulling informational texts that push their interests away from a love of reading for pleasure?

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ALAN Announces the New Nilsen–Donelson Award

Established in 2011 through the generous donations of Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don Nilsen, The Nilsen–Donelson Award is given to the author(s) of the best article published in *The ALAN Review* during a particular volume year. It recognizes excellence in scholarship in the field of YA literature, scholarship exemplified by former ALAN leaders Dr. Alleen Pace Nilsen and Dr. Ken Donelson. Recipients are awarded an honorarium of \$500 plus given a year's extension on membership in ALAN. Recognition of the award recipients will be made annually at the ALAN Breakfast during the NCTE conference. Members of the Nilsen–Donelson Award Committee were Steve Bickmore, Mark Letcher, Cleo Rhamy, and Mary Arnold.

The first winners are **Connie S. Zitlow and Lois T. Stover** for their article "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Adult: Who Is the Real Me?" The article appeared in *The ALAN Review*, Volume 38, Number 2 (Winter 2011).
