

## To Thine Own Self Be True:

But First, Write Your Way to That Self

**B**e true to yourself. Simple advice, until we try to apply it and a question emerges. “What is self?” The concept of identity is complex and certainly not static. Who I am at 12 is not who I am at 17; who I am as a daughter is not always who I am as a best friend; who I am in school is not who I am at the mall, or at my part-time job, or on Facebook, or alone in the wilderness. So how are teens to go about finding, or constructing, or understanding their intertwining selves? Is there a core self, a true self, that remains in any relationship and in any setting? Should there be?

Young adult literature can help young people as they go through what perhaps will be the first of many identity crises. The word *crisis* is dramatic, and feels right for what teens experience so deeply; the word hints at the agony that can be involved in confronting issues of self. Bucher and Hinton (2010) explain:

As they are bombarded with messages from parents, family, peers, television, the Internet, school, and their communities, young adults must search for ways to make sense of this cacophony of voices. While attempting to discover their own identities, they ask: Who am I? What kind of person will I grow up to be? . . . Developing a personal, sexual, and individual identity is a significant (although sometimes unconscious) task for young adults . . . Many young adults are turning to realistic fiction for answers. (p. 128)

Identity could be the overarching theme in an English language arts classroom for an entire school year; in fact, it might be hard to find novels for teens that do *not* involve characters searching for self, wondering about who they are in relation to others, in relation to their changing bodies, in relation to their world. Read-

ers can turn to literature to see the multitude of ways characters answer some of the questions raised above. This article will focus on books that have characters who write, who confront—and sometimes resolve—issues of identity through their writing. That writing can take many forms, so the sections are organized by genres and formats (though many books cross or stretch boundaries, or include multiple types of writing). Interestingly, while many of the examples involve characters who write by choice, a good number show characters responding to school assignments. They often begin these assignments with resistance but unwittingly end up with a great product as well as some understanding of who they are.

### Journals, Diaries, Blogs

In the graphic novel *Page by Paige* (Gulledge, 2011), the title character composes in both words and pictures to help herself figure out who Paige is when she has to start life in New York City after moving from Virginia. She actually has a chance to reinvent herself, both at school and within her family. As she tries to separate her own identity from that of her mother, whom she considers fake, she takes steps to assert herself, and then must ponder her mother’s words, “Sometimes I wonder what happened to the old Paige . . . She was a better daughter” (unpaged).

Eventually, Paige shows her sketchbook/notebook to her mom, which leads to a tentative yet caring and productive conversation. Later, Paige uses an analogy, showing that while mothers know what they hope their daughters will become, and can provide an out-

line, “. . . it’s the daughter who draws the lines, and she might connect dots you didn’t intend, making a whole different picture. . . . So I’ve gotta trust the dots she’s given me, and she’s gotta trust me to draw the picture myself” (unpaged).

In *Dear Toni*, by Sand-Eveland (2008), the plot is set into motion by a class writing assignment. The product will be put in a museum vault for 40 years to be read by a future audience. We get to see change as we read one middle school writer’s 100 entries, accompanied by drawings. It begins on Sept 9:

Dear Whoever You Are, Help me! I’m being beaten and tortured and tied to a post in a burning fire. . . . According to Mr. Mackenzie, my teacher, kids’ journals are a dying art form. Well, good thing, I say! . . . I am being forced to write for a hundred days. One hundred days of torture and pain. (p. 1)

The tone has changed by the last entry. “I guess maybe this journal is my Christmas gift to you . . . I hate good-byes. . . . Even though you weren’t ever REALLY here, you were real to me . . . and I am going to miss you a lot. I hope my life wasn’t too boring” (p. 125).

Detorie’s *The Accidental Genius of Weasel High* (2011) involves another long-term school assignment—this time a notebook blog extending over 20 weeks. Larkin Pace wins the grand prize for his illustrated blog, in which he tells some funny stories and figures out some things about himself in relation to family, friends, and (insert dramatic pause here) a girl.

## Letters

*The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999) is told as a series of letters that begin “Dear Friend.” Charlie has been a withdrawn observer of the world around him, but through his writing, we see him grad-

ually relating to people and coming to some understandings about events that led to his being a certain way, and about how it’s possible to become someone who can begin to relate to people. His final letter, he realizes, might be his last, since, “I’m not sure if I will have the time to write any more letters because I might be too busy trying to ‘participate’” (p. 213).

How do you know who you are after you lose everyone you love? In *Love, Aubrey* (LaFleur, 2009), the title character writes letters to her little sister’s imaginary friend, as well as to her mother who has abandoned her; through writing, she is able to grapple with hard questions, including why she survived the car accident that killed her father and sister. Writing also proves therapeutic. In a way, the letters are to herself—her *new self*.

Joe Jones reluctantly corresponds with an author in the short story, “Your Question for Author Here” (DiCamillo & Scieszka, 2010). He could be identified as a utilitarian—he asks the author to supply him with a bunch of author stuff for his assignment, and Maureen O’Toole answers in ways that actually get far more writing out of him than his teacher’s original questions would have, and some reading as well. Joe ends up asking a sincere question of the author, “How do you know if you might be a writer?” (p. 116). He surprises himself by doing some self-initiated writing, a haiku that begins “What author kicks butt . . .” (p. 123). His signing of his final letter with “Your writing pal” (p. 123) indicates that he knows himself—perhaps a new self—in a way that he did not at the beginning of the story.

In *So Totally Emily Beers* (Yee, 2007), Emily, on a cross-country trip with her mother after her parents’ divorce, writes a series of letters to her dad, though we never know until the end if she will send them. She reflects, “How did the pioneers do it? Did they have to ride with their mothers? There’s no way I’m going to make it to California” (p. 7). Much later, settled in her new home, she writes about their visit to a psychologist. “It was just like three friends talking, only one was a mom, one was a daughter, and one was a psychologist . . .” (p. 266). After asking the psychologist if she gets paid just for talking to people and hearing the response, “I get paid for listening, too,” Emily realizes, “I think I want to be a psychologist when I grow up” (p. 267). That discovery helps her relate to her absent father in a new way, also.

### Additional Books with Characters Writing Journals, Diaries, Blogs

Almond, D. (2010). *My name is Mina*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.

Klise, L. (2001). *Trial by journal* (M. S. Klise, Illus.). New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Myers, W. D. (1999). *Monster* (C. Myers, Illus.). New York, NY: HarperCollins.

## Other Books Using an Epistolary Format

- Baskin, N. R. (2009). *Anything but typical*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Klise, K. (2007). *Regarding the bees: A lesson in letters, on honey, dating, and other sticky subjects* (M. K. Klise, Illus.). Orlando, FL: Harcourt.
- Lubar, D. (2005). *Sleeping freshmen never lie*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Spinelli, J. (2007). *Love, Stargirl*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Woodson, J. (2009). *Peace, Locomotion*. New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

## Memoir and Autobiographies

Joe Bunch is skeptical about writing his alphabiography for his seventh-grade teacher, not only because it would be boring to write about himself from A–Z and it would be difficult to use all the letters (since he doesn't care much for xylophones), but also because he knows telling the truth about his identity could lead to trouble. In *Totally Joe* (Howe, 2005), Joe informs us, "Every single thing anybody knows about us is ammunition" (unpaged). Joe has experienced harassment from classmates who don't appreciate his sexual orientation, but he doesn't let this stop him from writing about his crushes, friendships, and thoughts about his future wedding plans, recognizing that there will be no bride. The Life Lesson at the end of the entry on his future states, "There should be a magazine called *Grooms*" (p. 85). By the time Joe gets to W, he chooses to have the letter stand for *Writing*; he has figured out that he likes writing, and that, as the Life Lesson says, ". . . when you're writing, the person you're talking to is mostly yourself" (p. 176).

*My Most Excellent Year* (Kluger, 2008) consists of three essays written by eleventh graders who agree that their ninth-grade year fits the title of the assignment best. Their memoirs are aided by documents such as saved emails, instant messages, and theatre programs. T. C., Alejandra, and Augie figured out a lot about themselves that memorable year. Augie writes, "I figured out something in ninth grade . . . when I chose a brother who could teach me how to be Augie

Hwong . . . I figured out that it's not just the people we love, but the people who love us *back* who show us how high we can really soar" (p. 391). He concludes his memoir with a Sondheim (1981) quote:

"Here's to us.  
Who's like us?  
Damn few." (p. 392)

## Poetry

The ninth-grade narrator in *My Best Friend, the Atlantic Ocean, and Other Great Bodies Standing between Me and My Life with Giulio* (Harrington, 2008) holds a philosophy: "Life is just so much happier when you shoot for the middle" (p. 133). While writing in her poetry journal, Delia notices that her teacher has sat down to grade papers, ". . . so I'm going to stop sonneting for a while. I'm SO not exerting all that effort when he's not watching. I'm not into that over-achievement thing, after all. I mean, there could be a limited amount of achievement in my body, and what if I use it all up before I reach, say, 17? THEN what?" (p. 31).

While Dilia doesn't see herself as much of a student, we readers can't help but notice that she is learning in spite of herself. She's daydreaming about a boy, and ponders, "Ironic, isn't it, that you have to be together in order to break up. (We reviewed literary terms in class today, which is why I'm so up on my irony at the moment. English teachers always seem to find a way to teach about irony, every year,

## Other Books with Authors or Characters Writing Memoir

- Abeel, S. (2003). *My thirteenth winter: A memoir*. New York, NY: Orchard Books.
- Fershleiser, R., & Smith, L. (2009). *Six-word memoirs on love and heartbreak by writers famous and obscure from Smith Magazine*. New York, NY: HarperPerennial.
- Greenwald, S. (2006). *Rosie Cole's memoir explosion*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Small, D. (2009). *Stitches: A memoir*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
- Wizner, J. (2007). *Spanking Shakespeare*. New York, NY: Random House.

and I always seem to forget what it means in a matter of minutes.)” (p. 83). At another point, she lets us in on her writing process. “Maybe—for reasons I can’t begin to comprehend—it would be easier to express what’s on my mind if I were to reach back a ways and get into e.e. cummings mode . . .” (p. 131). The story concludes with her resisting (or at least pretending to resist) her changing identity. She’s heading out on vacation, and will not be forced to use her poetry writing muscles for a week:

I feel sad about that, actually, like I’m going to miss you, journal. But I have to close you up, now, and we’ll meet again on Thursday and have a chat.

Wait a minute! I’m writing to myself, so I’M the journal. Which means I’m CLOSING MYSELF UP INSIDE IT. HELP! GET ME OUTA—(p. 141)

*Fishtailing* (Phillips, 2009) is a novel in verse, narrated by four teens and accompanied by teacher comments that show how influential teachers can be as young people are struggling to find, create, and express who they have been, are, and are becoming. The kids write from their hearts and wrench the readers’ hearts, but evidently not the heart of Mrs. Farr, who responds to one poet, “You have an admirable grasp of syntax and a rich vocabulary. However, your images are disturbingly violent. Perhaps you can find more optimistic diction to flavor your poetry. We can all use optimism” (p. 14). Here’s another:

Your narrative line of the Central American village massacre rings with authenticity and verisimilitude. It is a dreadful chapter in that region’s history, and an individual tragedy for anyone involved in it. If this is your experience, my sympathies.

### Other Books Involving Poetry

- Creech, S. (2001) *Love that dog*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Creech, S. (2008). *Hate that cat*. New York, NY: Joanna Cotler Books.
- Nye, N. S., selector. (2010). *Time you let me in: 25 poets under 25*. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books.
- Watson, R. (2010). *What Momma left me*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.
- Woodson, J. (2005). *Locomotion*. New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons.

In your poem, however, you dwell on blood and carnage excessively. Perhaps an uplifting moment of redemption is in order for the protagonist. You might also reconsider your point of view. (p. 35)

## Journalism

Adina is a journalist. Well, that was her identity before she landed on an island with a bunch of beauty pageant contestants. She had participated in the contest only as a means to an end, intending to write an exposé of the practice she so hated, but a plane crash foiled her plans. Can she still be an investigative reporter without pen, paper, computer? And will she find out things about these girls that are far different from her original hypotheses? Read *Beauty Queens* (Bray, 2011) to find out. Every survivor demonstrates major identity shifts in this funny, thought-provoking book.

Hildy Biddle, in Bauer’s *Peeled* (2008), is a reporter for her high school newspaper, *The Core*. She used to wear that identity comfortably, since she was the daughter of a respected journalist. Now that her dad is dead, she’s confused, but her writing helps her deal with grief, and she gets very serious when she investigates happenings at a supposedly haunted house in her apple-farming community. Someone is lying, and is willing to go to great lengths to see that she does not discover the truth or print her opinions in her new publication, *The Peel*. She finds a mentor in a former professional journalist and encounters situations that test and strengthen her sense of ethics and commitment to both justice and the rights provided by the First Amendment. Hildy has enemies, but they don’t include herself. Though one of her conclusions is, “If you need to be popular, journalism is not for you” (p. 229), she gets to a place where she knows her father would be proud of her, an authentic place where she can be who she really is, and who she wants to be.

In Bryant’s historical novel *The Trial* (2004), Katie lives an ordinary life until the day she is chosen to be her uncle’s assistant at the historic trial of Bruno Richard Hauptmann, accused murderer of the Lindbergh baby in 1932. Katie gets to try out a new role as she listens carefully, observes the people in the courtroom, forms opinions, and learns the ins and outs of being a reporter. In an intense six weeks, she grows proportionately in skill, wisdom, and maturity. She likes the identity she has assumed and plans to pursue journalism as a career.

## Other Books Relating to Journalism

- Crysdale, J. (2010). *Fearless female journalists*. Toronto, ONT: Second Story Press.
- Feinstein, J. (2005). *Last shot: A Final Four mystery*. New York, NY: Knopf.
- Ingold, J. (2010). *Paper daughter*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Kunze, L., with Onur, R. (2011). *Secrets*. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books.
- Myers, W. D. (2010). *Cruisers*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

## Writing for Self, toward Self

There are many other books with characters who write for any number of purposes. Jason, in *Anything but Typical* (Baskin, 2009) is not comfortable relating to people face to face, but is secure and confident as a writer. He composes stories online and corresponds with other creative writers, including a girl he comes to really like. When he gets an opportunity to meet her at a StoryBoard conference, he's faced with a crisis of identity. Rebecca will discover he has autism. Will that scare her away, ruining their relationship? What does it mean if he is not willing to share that part of his identity with her? Can he take the risk?

Story writing is crucial to the plot of *The Wild Girls* (Murphy, 2007). Two girls win a short story contest, earning the right to attend a prestigious writing camp. As they try out new techniques and storylines, they discover things about themselves that are empowering. In both *A Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame* (Woods, 2010) and *Kalpana's Dream* (Clarke, 2004), teachers' essay writing assignments lead to self-discovery and expression. In the latter, the assignment given to eleventh-graders directly asks them to ask themselves "Who am I?" and answer that crucial question. The main character in Donnelly's *Revolution* (2010) has to write a major research thesis in order to graduate. The task takes Andi to places far away and deep within, resulting in healing and major change.

Readers who meet some of these characters who are writers might begin to notice something interesting. We so often hear about people searching for themselves, trying to "find themselves," often looking in all the wrong places. But maybe that phrase

and concept are flawed. How could there be a self out there somewhere, or even within, all ready to be discovered? Rather, what we see in these books with characters who write is that the writing helps them construct an identity; they write themselves into being. If the characters can do it, readers can, too.

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- Murphy, P. (2007). *The wild girls*. New York, NY: Viking.
- Phillips, W. (2009). *Fishtailing*. Regina, Canada: Coteau Books for Teens.
- Sand-Eveland, C. (2008). *Dear Toni*. Toronto, ONT: Tundra Books.
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