

The Healing Power of Art

“What he said to his enemies / was a window pushed high as it would go.
Come in, look for me where you think / I am. Then when you see no one is there,
we can talk.”

—Nye, “What He Said to His Enemies” (2002, p.119)

In 2010, while speaking to the Arizona Humanities Council in Tempe, Arizona, poet Naomi Shihab Nye asked: “Is empathy the key note to sustainability?” She went on to posit that art can lead us to places of respect for one another, a fact she illustrates in her poem “Wandering around an Albuquerque Airport Terminal” (2007). Besides illustrating the power of human compassion and connection, the poem confirms that hearing one another’s stories is a form of cultural diplomacy.

The poem further identifies communication as an essential ingredient in the transfer of emotion and reveals the power of language to inextricably link and heal us: “The minute she heard any words she knew—however poorly used—she stopped crying.” Hope for unity, for communication across cultural lines—what Nye describes in her poem as “the shared world”—is not lost if we take the time to listen, to connect, to share. We redefine and remake ourselves; we become different people as we read more, talk more, and write more. When we hear people’s stories, when we share intimate aspects of self and culture, when we accept new ways of knowing, we can reduce ignorance, grow hope, and diminish hate.

If the growing body of young adult literature (YAL) on the topic of art’s healing power is any evidence, other authors share Nye’s beliefs. Alexie makes

the point rather explicit in his book *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* (2007), a mostly autobiographical text in which he turns his life into art. Bruce, Baldwin, and Umphrey (2008) present Alexie’s philosophy: “Alexie equates poetry with survival. . . . Art is a synthesis of imagination coupled with anger Art intervenes in violence and generates survival” (p. 7). Literature with this focus, shared with adolescent readers, might foster humanitarian habits of mind as well as build an awareness of the healing power of art. This article examines YAL as a potential tool for approaching humanitarian discussions, provides an annotated bibliography of relevant YA books, and explores one novel in depth to illustrate YAL’s power for encouraging critical thinking about social issues and for recognizing art’s healing power.

YA Literature as Mentor Texts

YAL works to build the empathy Nye describes because it features characters and issues with which adolescent readers can readily identify; the texts are relevant and relatable. A springboard for stimulating multifaceted thinking, YAL provides the opportunity to read, to write, and to argue about social issues in a modern context.

Young adult authors like those featured in the

annotated bibliography of Figure 1 address the healing power of art while also commenting on art as a vehicle for discovering identity. All of these authors seem to suggest art carries not only an element of catharsis and discovery, but also a transformative power. This transformation is mostly personal for the protagonists featured, since the art serves as a psychological balm, but it becomes public when the protagonist acts on his/her enlightenment and works toward social change. Although art helps us understand the world in which we live, somehow it also connects us to our humanity and to the nuances of relationships. As a repository for artifacts, art further acts as a type of cultural encyclopedia—a reference, a decoder or translator of who we are as a people. As we individually escape into artistic creation, we discover potential; art renews our hopes and gives us reason to dream. Art provides a place to battle the demons in our lives and to survive the fight.

In their recent article, “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Adult: Who Is the Real Me?” Zitlow and Stover (2011) argue for “using art to order [life’s] chaos” (p. 34). They describe how YAL provides a bridge to self-discovery and how art can help teens “better negotiate the difficult waters of adolescence” (p. 35).

Because young adult literature is likely to reflect the diverse realities that young people face, its topics are accessible and relevant. Adolescents often connect with these novels because they identify with characters comparable in age whose lives parallel their own and who struggle with similar conflicts and issues. Implementing books with explicit humanitarian themes potentially encourages critical and independent thinking while supporting youth agency, inviting engagement, and sponsoring literacy.

Catching Fire Reveals the Power of Art

One book with a strong art-as-healing motif, *Catching Fire* (2009) by Suzanne Collins, captured the interest of adolescent readers in 2010 when it reached number one on YALSA’s Teens’ Top Ten list. Collins’s dystopian novel is the second in a trilogy about Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark after their experience in the Hunger Games arena, the Capitol’s sadistic and tyrannical means to inspire fear and to maintain control. This installment in the saga reveals the two teens seeking retaliation against President Snow, a preda-

tory leader who doesn’t just have blood on his hands but also blood on his breath. A satyric man, he is fond of unrestrained revelry, lecherous in his use and abuse of power and in his disregard for human life.

Realizing they are pawns in a political game, Katniss and Peeta both decide to defy the Capitol and give hope to the rebels with their final messages to the designers of the Games. As a means to send that message, they transform art into activism. During the Hunger Games, Rue suffers a senseless death, motivating Katniss to send a message to the Capitol by bedecking her with a floral shroud—a gesture of both defiance and love. She wants President Snow to know the depth of her attachment to Rue as well as to send a message that such manipulation and acts of senseless killing have not gone unnoticed. Katniss also designs a soft sculpture and hangs an effigy of Seneca Crane (p. 237) to mimic how the Capitol put him to death for allowing two tributes to live in the Hunger Games.

Peeta paints Rue, capturing and memorializing her in those moments after her death in the arena. Although their thinking is openly forbidden, Peeta wants to hold the government accountable, and Katniss considers her boldness proof that they might be able to kill her in body but not in spirit. She refuses to play the Games by the Capitol’s rules; she’s willing to be a martyr for the cause.

Besides using art to reclaim his power, Peeta attempts to utilize his talent as a baker, painter, and illustrator to showcase beauty in a world gone rotten. During the meeting with President Snow, Katniss’s mother serves cookies that feature Peeta’s frosting work: “They are beautifully iced with softly colored flowers” (p. 22). The cookie that Katniss crushes during her conference with President Snow displays a tiger lily, a flower depicting both art and symbolism. According to blessedgardens.com, the tiger lily represents the water element and the more powerful

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Alexie, S. (2007). *The absolutely true diary of a part-time Indian*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.

Using the humor motif and cartooning, Alexie demonstrates through his protagonist, Junior, how humor and poetry carry the power to save us from despair, from a loss of human identity, and from genocide of the human spirit.

Anderson, L. H. (2001). *Speak*. New York, NY: Penguin Putnam.

To heal from her silent depression, Melinda, a rape victim, draws trees. With the help of her art assignments, Melinda gains the perspective and strength to express her feelings. Ultimately, she reclaims her voice and speaks out against her attacker.

Carvell, M. (2002). *Who will tell my brother?* New York, NY: Hyperion.

Drawing from his father's patience and strength and motivated by his brother, Evan is determined to enlighten his community about the disrespect perpetuated by Indian mascots. For his efforts, Evan faces the bullying and violence that often accompany intolerance. To help him understand his cultural identity and how intricately it is tied to his past and to his ancestors, Evan draws hands, an exercise that reconnects him to his estranged Mohawk family circle and engenders cultural pride.

Creech, S. (2004). *Heartbeat*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Although this story is told in free-verse poems about a 12-year-old, its symbolic depth offers appeal to older readers. In an effort to understand death, loss, and the power of perspective, Annie—whose running cadence parallels a heartbeat—draws apples. Both her running and her art are attempts to escape the changes in her life: her mother's pregnancy and her grandfather's encroaching dementia.

Fitch, J. (1999). *White oleander*. New York, NY: Little, Brown, and Company.

Astrid Magnussen and Paul Trout survive the cruelties life thrusts upon them, not the least of which are the travesties of the foster care system. If not for his cartoon artistry and graphic novel creations, readers would question Paul's ability to survive just as readily as we observe the therapeutic power Astrid's art has for her. Whether painting, drawing, remaking her mother's letters sent from prison, or designing suitcases to capture the impact, influence, and personality of each of the mother figures in her life, Astrid discovers her identity, her humanity, and the transcendent power of art. True to the Old Norse origin of her name, Astrid finds beauty despite the ugliness and the unfairness of life.

Hyde, C. R. (2010). *Jumpstart the world*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

Elle has been abandoned by her mother whose wealthy new boyfriend Donald doesn't want to live with a teenager. So, at age 15, Elle has her own apartment and must learn to navigate the world without traditional support. The support she does find comes from unexpected friendships, especially from her neighbor Frank, who tells Elle: "That's why there's such a thing as activism. Sometimes you have to jumpstart the world just to get it to be what even the world admits it should be" (p. 143). With inspiration from Frank, Elle becomes an activist using a camera.

Koertge, R. (2003). *Shakespeare bats cleanup*. New York, NY: Candlewick Press.

When 14-year-old Kevin Boland catches mononucleosis and is quarantined in his home, he discovers that keeping a journal and experimenting with poetry not only fills the monotonous hours but also helps him develop a stronger sense of self, make sense of his passions for baseball and girls, enrich his relationship with his father, and come to terms with his mother's death.

Paulsen, G. (1988). *The island*. New York, NY: Dell.

Wil, like a contemporary Thoreau, discovers the wonders of nature through drawing herons, turtles, frogs, and fish, while also learning intimate details about his own identity. The island experience also helps Wil navigate the tension rising between his parents and the move to yet another new town.

Sandell, L. A. (2009). *A map of the known world*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Wishing to escape the monotony of her claustrophobic life and to distract her from the grief of her brother Nate's death, Cora Bradley seeks solace in drawing beautiful maps. When Cora begins to develop a relationship with Damian, the Poe-like boy who was in the car with Nate the night he died, she uncovers her brother's secret artistic life. In a collaborative project, both Cora and Damian learn the redemptive power of art, friendship, and love as they cope with the grief.

Figure 1. YA books featuring the power of art

aspects of femininity, especially female courage. In addition, tiger lilies are a hardy, resilient, and aggressive flower—once cut from the stem, another blossom will quickly replace it, and if not pruned often, tiger lilies can quickly overtake an entire garden. These features all relate to Katniss, the “girl on fire,” proclaiming she is a force to be reckoned with.

In an effort to take the power from his haunting dreams, Peeta paints. Art is his method for tapping his courage, his way to “stop running and turn around and face whoever wants [him] dead” (p. 118). Art also distracts Peeta’s mind, giving him something else to focus on: “I [Katniss] like to watch his hands as he works, making a blank page bloom with strokes of ink, adding touches of color to our previously black and yellowish book” (p. 161). Peeta also paints the Games—the detail is rich, the colors vivid, and the likeness so exact that Katniss responds, “I can almost smell the blood, the dirt, the unnatural breath of the mutt” (p. 53).

A third character who knows the power of art is Cinna. Whether designing wedding dresses, costumes that glow like coal embers, or a dress that spins out to reveal a feathery mockingjay, Cinna, who channels his emotions into his work, is a true artist with cloth and makeup and hair. In fact, his tremendous creativity and his ability to use art as activism get him killed.

Ultimately, Collins suggests art has power to influence the human condition; she presents characters who use art to make political and social statements, to escape oppression, and to cope with adversity. As Zitlow and Stover (2011) report, “Introducing students to such characters is one option for providing them with productive ways of making sense of their pain and confusion” (p. 35). Escaping from pain and confusion into art provides a healthy alternative to some of the choices adolescents might otherwise make. Collins’s characters also encourage students to question the status quo and to think critically about social issues like oppression, tyranny, and socioeconomic disparity.

Fostering Humanitarian Conversations

Although Jimi Hendrix proclaims, “Music doesn’t lie. If there is something to be changed in the world, then it can only happen through music” (Hendrix, 2010), that transformational power is not unique to music, as readers glean from Collins’s book. Long ago, Plato

outlined three castes in *The Republic*: Producers, Auxiliaries, and Guardians. As members of the Guardian caste, teachers nurture the intellectual, athletic, artistic, creative, and altruistic aspects of their students. The humanities enable and empower educators in that important humanitarian work, and a plethora of young adult books provide a map. As cultural voices, these authors as artists work for the betterment of the world, and through their art, youth can claim their own voices.

As they read these words, adolescents also read their world. Young adult books like the Hunger Games trilogy and like those in the annotated bibliography of Figure 1 provide interesting and complex ideas to discuss and debate. They supply an ideal platform for youth to notice differences, think critically, consider alternate positions, and make more informed, ethical choices. They also prescribe art as an antidote to pain and confusion. When curriculums foster conversations about books that focus on humanitarian concerns, they provide the opportunity to read, to write, and to argue about issues in a relevant context. Prompts like those listed in Figure 2 serve to stimulate conversation. Critical questioning on such topics exposes youth to situations that encourage a critical stance so as to inspire wisdom that might lead to an improved way of living in the world.

Wishing to steer away from controversy, teachers often hesitate to discuss contentious social issues or to conduct the conversations encouraged by critical theory pedagogy, but the process begins when teachers make stimulating materials available and allow for student questions. Of provocative texts, students will likely ask: “What is happening and how did it get this way?” According to McNeil (1999), “The main goal of this curriculum is to help students see different kinds of knowledge, to understand how knowledge is constructed or how it reflects a given social context, and to make their own knowledge” (p. 165). The goal is not to seek homogeneous interpretations, but rather to welcome diversity, encourage young people to negotiate their own meaning, to argue with the interpreta-

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1. Katniss passes judgment on the capricious fashion trends and social habits of the Capitol. According to Katniss, the Capitol is where everyone lives “incomprehensibly silly lives” (p. 37). From shade-shifting skin to intricate tattoos and atypical hairstyles, the people in the Capitol strive for individually special looks. Speculate about contemporary society’s obsession with vanity—looking younger, slimmer/trimmer, and more attractive for the opposite sex. What motivates this focus?
 2. Katniss sees the same freakish excess in the Capitol’s eating habits and parties—essentially allusions to the conspicuous consumption famous in Trimalchio’s feast: “The party, held in President Snow’s mansion, has no equal” (p. 76); no opulence has been spared, “so that people can eat and drink and do whatever they please in the utmost comfort. . . . But the real star of the evening is the food. Tables laden with delicacies line the walls” (p. 77). While people in the outlying districts suffer poverty and starvation, “here in the Capitol they’re vomiting for the pleasure of filling their bellies again and again” (p. 80). Where in society do you see “freakish excess” or tremendous disparity? What is your response to such situations?
 3. Katniss wonders: “Who else will I fail to save from the Capitol’s vengeance? Who else will be dead if I don’t satisfy President Snow?” (p. 41) Likewise, Gale asks: “What about the other families, Katniss? The ones who can’t run away? Don’t you see? It can’t be about just saving *us* anymore” (p. 100). Where do you stand on the subject of social obligation? To what degree are humanitarian concerns an individual’s responsibility?
 4. Setting aside her personal fears and safety, Katniss decides not to run away but to fight for Rue and Prim and all the other children: “Aren’t they the very reason I have to try to fight? Because what has been done to them is so wrong, so beyond justification, so evil that there is no choice? Because no one has the right to treat them as they have been treated?” (p. 123). Knowing there is injustice in the world, should we attempt to fix it? Do we challenge the status quo or just avoid conflict? Have you ever chosen to fight against some injustice? If not, what paralyzed your decision? Describe the experience.
 5. Katniss realizes that people don’t respond to help Gale after the whipping in the square because “fear [gets] the better of compassion” (p. 109). To what degree do you agree with Katniss’s assessment about human behavior? Have you ever experienced the fear she describes?
 6. As punishment for his supposed crimes, the Capitol turns Darius into an Avox, a word formed from *vox*, the Latin for voice, and the prefix *a-*, meaning *not* or *without*. This man, whose voice, playful and bright, would ring across the Hob to tease Katniss, is mutilated, robbing him of speech. Think about and describe a time you have been robbed of your voice or you have observed someone else who has been silenced by an abusive display of power or by intimidation factors.
 7. What strategies do you have for easing the pain of life’s chaos? How might art help do so?
 8. Consider the work of these artistic activists:
 - the music of the American folk music duo, the Indigo Girls, who have championed various causes and held benefit concerts for the environment, gay rights, the rights of Native Americans, and the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty;
 - the documentary photography of social activist Jacob Riis, who argued for a change in tenement housing in New York City at the turn of the 20th century through his photographs;
 - the satirical street art of England-based Banksy, who makes political and social commentary with his graffiti;
 - other artists who function as activists.
- Do you consider these artistic actions effective forms of protest? Have you ever performed art to convey a social message?

Figure 2. Talking points/writing prompts with a humanitarian focus

tions of others, and to make sense of popular culture in terms of their own values.

When horror haunts life, whether as terrorism or violence, as upset or upheaval, the question should be, *what can I do?* These authors suggest we turn to art. Art slows us down, forces us to notice and to cherish small details, details that disaster has the power to erase. In *19 Varieties of Gazelle* (2002), Nye claims “We need poetry for nourishment and noticing, for the way language and imagery reach comfortably into experience, holding and connecting it more successfully than any news channel we could name” (p. xvi).

This focus on nourishment and noticing teaches us that art’s job is not only to look nice; art has something to say. In this role as spokesperson and sage, today’s young adult books possess immense potential. They speak to adolescents, using their language and meeting their emotional needs as they are developing personal philosophies. They also illustrate art’s power in the struggle against the demons in our lives. Art contributes to perspective building and to survival; as we expand the canon, we expand minds with the offered diversity in perspective.

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