

## Stories from the Field

**Editor's Note:** *Stories from the Field* invites readers to share a story about young adult literature. This section features brief vignettes (approximately 300 words) from practicing teachers and librarians who would like to share their interactions with students, parents, colleagues, and administrators around young adult literature. Please send your stories to [jbach@lsu.edu](mailto:jbach@lsu.edu).

### Boys and Poetry Do Mix: A Story of Engagement

**Heather R. Haverback**

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My first experience in a 7th-grade language arts classroom was as a preservice teacher. It was here that I learned a lesson that has stayed close to my heart and my pedagogy. When offered the motivational factors of challenge, choice, and collaboration (Gambrell & Morrow, 1996), poetry and boys *do* mix.

When I was first placed in the middle school outside a large city, I thought I was out of my league. The school was big, and the students were worldly. Coming into the classroom, I felt ready to teach language arts to highly motivated students; however, I found that engaging middle school students in literature was going to be challenging. What grabbed my attention was the difficulty in engaging the adolescent boys.

This was until we decided to start a poetry unit based on traditional and modern poetry, including music and rap. The unit started with an analysis of poetry during which students could choose what they

read, and it culminated with a reading of the students' original poetry. It was interesting to note that once the students had the choice and challenge of writing their personal poetry, their motivation and engagement grew. To add to my excitement, all of the boys were reading, writing, revising, and eager to share.

In our culmination of the unit, we celebrated and collaborated with formal poetry readings. My mentor brought candles, food, and drinks, and the students and teachers dressed in suits. I was inspired watching previously apathetic students now coming to class in suits and ties eager to share their work. The memory still brings tears to my eyes. While young man after young man came to the front of the room to share his personal poetry, their pride in their literary accomplishments was overwhelming.

### Reference

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### Poetry Breaks!

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In a Literature for Young Adults class I teach for prospective language arts teachers, only a few genuinely appreciate poetry. Some remember poetry fondly from elementary school, but not from high school.

The leading complaints? “The teacher told us our interpretations were wrong” or “I couldn’t relate to the required poems.” Often, many of these soon-to-be teachers don’t read aloud well, aren’t familiar with the wealth of poetry by and for YAs, and don’t realize the critical role exposure plays in making poetry accessible and engaging. So, I adapted Luchetti’s (n.d.) Poetry Breaks concept.

First, during a 2–3 minute Poetry Break, I read aloud poems I believe are suitable and appealing to YAs: Wayman’s mirthful and sarcastic “Did I Miss Anything?” or Webb’s ironic “The Death of Santa Claus,” which elicits gasps of (horrified!) laughter. Then, I bring an extravaganza of poetry books to class for inspiration: Betsy Franco’s collections of compelling poems composed by disenfranchised YAs, John Grandit’s irreverent concrete poem books, and Mel Glenn’s poem novels that capture the cruelty of high school, to name a few.

Gradually, the class takes over Poetry Breaks. They select, practice, and then read poems to us. Ken reads in a respectful, quiet voice from Sonya Sones’s (2001) *Stop Pretending: What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy*; Tonja reads a dazzling poem a teen girl wrote about soft Haitian rain—pre-hurricane—from Lydia Okutoro’s (1999) anthology; Katia reads Sylvia Plath’s (1959) “Mushrooms” in measured confident tones. Other selections come from Mark Bibbins’s (2009) *The Dance of No Hard Feelings*, Jack Prelutsky’s (2009) *Swamps of Sleethe*, and humorist Douglas Florian’s expressionistic illustrated poetry collections about fish, insects, and mammals.

Students report that Poetry Breaks expose them to poems and poets they might not otherwise have known and give them a chance to read aloud in a safe harbor. Through Poetry Breaks, these novices are finding their voices as teachers.

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## How Lauren Gave Sam Her Voice

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“You just don’t know how it feels to be hated,” Sam said to me. Sam (a pseudonym) “came out” to her classmates a week prior. Immediately, she said, notes threatening and demeaning her were passed around like bottles of beer at underage parties. She was spat on, called names, and even picked up and slammed into a garbage can. Her response was to keep silent, for she was more afraid of what might happen if she fought back or told anyone than what was already occurring. Sam lost her voice and her spirit.

In an effort to help Sam, one thing I did was to turn to what I know best—books. I placed a copy of Lauren Myracle’s *Shine* in Sam’s hands and asked her to read. The next day, she rushed into class ready to discuss what she had read. Witnessing her passion for what she was reading, I asked Sam to keep a journal. The day Sam finished the book, she handed me her journal and asked me to open it up to the last page and read it. So I did. It read “Ms. Taylor, not only did this book save my life, it saved the lives of so many others! Thank you for giving me my voice back!”

As the tears streamed down my face, I looked at Sam and noticed a beautiful, strong, and confident young woman standing in front of me. I smiled, gave her a hug and whispered in her ear “You are never alone!” Books have the power to save lives. While not every book is for every reader, for every reader there is a book. For Sam it was Lauren’s. Without this encounter, we may be reading a very different ending to how Sam got her voice back!

## Infiltrating the Classroom

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In order to fulfill my Geaux Teach requirements for LSU, I have been observing classes at an inner-city high school in Baton Rouge. During this time, I was also enrolled in a course at LSU called Young Adult Literature. All semester, I have been learning about the merits and value of young adult literature, about how it touches and relates to the kids who read it. I had never thought about young adult literature as its own genre or as a viable reading/teaching option for an English classroom, but this course changed my opinion. However, I was skeptical as to how young adult literature would translate into a real-world classroom.

In the classroom I was observing, the students were completing outside reading of *The Hunger Games*. I was immediately filled with cynicism. Was this young adult book actually getting through to these inner-city students? Were they actually able to relate and find meaning in this novel? I had a hopeless feeling that the students weren't any more interested in

this book then they were in *The Crucible*.

Then one day, while I was observing 5th hour, my cynicism evaporated. As I walked around the room collecting *The Hunger Games* from the students after their 15 minutes of silent reading, I saw it: the third book in the Hunger Games series sitting on a student's desk! I looked at this student who I saw as quiet, a student who flies under the radar, a student who looks asleep half of the time during class. Yet there the book sat. My heart fluttered as I asked him if he had read the entire series. He replied with a quiet, "Yes." I asked, "Well, what do you think? Are they good?" and he said, "They're great."

That day I realized that young adult literature can infiltrate the classroom and students' interests despite all the usual odds. It's as simple as one young adult relating to another young adult, even if he or she comes from a different background or lifestyle. The struggles of young adults are universal, and although I don't know what this particular student struggled with or for what reason he was so intrigued by *The Hunger Games*, the fact remains that he *was* intrigued, and he did find something that pushed him to keep reading an entire series. So there you have it: young adult literature *is* a viable and valuable option for the modern classroom!

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## 2013 Call for CEL Award for Exemplary Leadership

Please nominate an exceptional leader who has had an impact on the profession through one or more of the following: (1) work that has focused on exceptional teaching and/or leadership practices (e.g., building an effective department, grade level, or building team; developing curricula or processes for practicing English language arts educators; or mentoring); (2) contributions to the profession through involvement at both the local and national levels; (3) publications that have had a major impact. This award is given annually to an NCTE member who is an outstanding English language arts educator and leader. Your award nominee submission must include a nomination letter, the nominee's curriculum vitae, and no more than three additional letters of support from various colleagues. Send by **February 1, 2013**, to: Wanda Porter, 47 Puukani Place, Kailua, HI 96734; wandrport@hawaiiantel.net. (Subject: CEL Exemplary Leader).

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