

## Probing Text Complexity:

Reflections on Reading *The Giver* as Pre-teens, Teens, and Adults

**T**he call for manuscripts for this issue asks, “What [YA] titles endure and why?” During Angie’s 12 years of teaching a young adult literature course at Wright State University, she has always chosen Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* (1993) to initiate college students who are used to a diet of classics, since they often believe only classics are of value in classroom settings. This Newbery-winning book’s emotional and philosophical complexity parallels classics such as *1984* and *Brave New World*, enabling even high-browed English majors to easily see the value of YA literature. As one student, Jacob (all names are pseudonyms), wrote, “[I]f this is what YA lit is about, sign me up!” On a syllabus where book titles come and go, *The Giver* has remained, due to the passionate responses it continues to evoke from adult readers. The enduring questions that cut to the core of our identities as individuals and members of a society and the artful rendering of the plot make *The Giver* a classic.

Pardon the cliché, but time does indeed fly, and 10 years have passed since Angie and two students from her young adult literature course wrote an article about the power of reading *The Giver* at the time of the September 11 terrorist attacks (Johnson, Kleismit, & Williams, 2002). Now another pattern in reading *The Giver* has emerged from the written responses—1½–2 pages about their thoughts, feelings, and the craft of the novel—of two undergraduate YA literature classes. Angie noticed the increasingly poignant and powerful ways in which adults described their reactions to this young adult book. In addition, those

who had read the book during their upper-elementary, middle school, or high school years seemed to have significantly more powerful responses as adult readers compared to their initial responses to the book. While it is no surprise that students would report different responses from their readings as youths, Angie recently noticed far more adults commenting on this phenomenon in an intentionally generic writing prompt. Perhaps the increased number of students writing about their younger experiences reading *The Giver* implies that more teachers of younger students are incorporating this enduring book in their literature studies, and of course this also speaks to the power of the book for individual readers—teachers—who want to share this excellent novel with their students.

Intrigued by the commonalities in the students’ responses, Angie asked all members of two YA literature classes for permission to study their responses, inviting them to be co-researchers. Laurel and Jessie stepped forward to learn the ropes of qualitative research. From a total of 43 students in the two classes, 26 granted consent for their responses to be used for the study. Each with our own copies of the participants’ responses to *The Giver*, we individually pored over the data, reading through the responses without *a priori* assumptions to allow patterns to emerge.

We met and discussed many facets of the responses; three themes emerged from our participants as they recalled *The Giver* from their youth. *The Giver* left them 1) not understanding the novel, 2) not liking the novel, or 3) not *remembering* the novel (ironic for a book about the value of memory!). On the other

hand, the adults also wrote of the tremendous power *The Giver* held for them now, either as a first-read or subsequent reading. Focusing on the intensity of adult readers' responses to the text, three additional themes emerged from comments about 1) their connections to Jonas, 2) their empathy for him, and 3) their insights and questions sparked by the book. How can an award-winning novel written specifically for young adults have such a different impact on younger readers than adult readers? Examining adult readers' powerful evocations of *The Giver* and comparing their past and present readings of this enduring book can provide insights to curricular literary text selection and the Common Core State Standards (2012a).

### **What Makes *The Giver* Complex?**

Given the push for increased text complexity due to the CCSS, teachers may run toward dense classics to ensure a rigorous curriculum. However, when adults who are devoting their lives to the teaching of English spontaneously vouch for the complexity and craft of a YA novel—as evidenced in the adults' responses to *The Giver*—there is a serious argument for its quality and complexity. At a purely surface level, the book's vocabulary is not too advanced, making it easier to read; however, common words take on meanings specific to the narrative—phrases such as “comfort objects” and “relief-of-pain.” The euphemistic language (e.g., “release,” “stirrings”) may challenge some readers intellectually and emotionally. In addition, the book requires many inferences to be made by the reader. Even some of the adults wonder about the light-eyed reference regarding Jonas, Rosemary, and The Receiver. Lowry's novel also poses intellectually difficult questions: What makes for a good and just society? How do we overcome that paralyzing moment when we have no idea whom we can truly trust?

Perhaps most important, the book is emotionally challenging. The works our society tends to deem most worthwhile and those that last the test of time are often titles that present new, often disturbing, insights. (Consider Academy Award-winning films and Nobel Prize-winning literature.) *The Giver*'s intensity of emotion juxtaposed against a sterile, blindly accepting society is truly chilling. With the many complexities of this novel, it is no wonder that adults recalled their confusion upon an initial reading at younger ages.

Lowry stated that though she wrote without a

particular audience in mind, she later believed the novel best suited for eighth grade and higher because “although a younger reader can enjoy the story that is contained in the book, it takes a slightly more mature kid to begin to appreciate the issues and questions the book raises” (L. Lowry, personal communication, May 28, 2012). This statement was based on what Lowry has heard from teachers about their students' reactions.

Teachers, parents, and students alike acknowledge the complexity of *The Giver* in online discussions, such as the following comments from a 2009

amazon.com discussion thread. While some teachers have had positive experiences reading the book with younger students, many commented on the deep issues that might be better comprehended at older ages. One parent wrote that fifth graders “are not mature enough to understand the philosophical issues that this book brings up.” Similarly, another contributor wrote, “I am a great admirer of Lois Lowry's work, just not this series—for this age group [10-year-olds] in a school setting. At the risk of appearing ridiculous, I would say great college material.” Certainly the YA literature students agree with this comment; it is far from ridiculous. In fact, the recommended eighth-grade readership may be a bit young according to this reader: “I am a teenager who read the book in 8th grade. I honestly do not recommend the book for kids that young.” Even this engaged reader, one who comments on an amazon.com discussion, had difficulty in eighth grade, perhaps at the age of 13 or 14, reading *The Giver*.

To be clear, we are not advocating censorship; we treasure *The Giver* and hope all readers experience its power. We are, however, advocating an acknowledgment of the text's complexity and a reconsideration of the grades in which the book may be required for whole-class or group literary study. Readers are individuals, and some younger readers will grasp the nuances of *The Giver*, but in general, older teenagers and adults may reap the most benefits from such a layered novel.

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The truth is, YA literature has been overlooked in the push for increasing complexity and rigor in the curriculum. We contend that the concept of text complexity in the CCSS has been oversimplified. The Standard 10: Range, Quality, and Complexity web-

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page for the CCSS (2012c) lists no YA titles for high schoolers. The CCSS's "Appendix B: Text Exemplars and Sample Performance Tasks" (2012b) lists *The Book Thief* (Zusak, 2006) as the sole YA title suggested for grades 9–10, and no YA novels are recommended for grades 11–CCR ("career and college readi-

ness"). It seems the mere label of "young adult" puts a book in jeopardy of not being incorporated into the high school curriculum.

*The Giver*, regardless of the lack of challenging vocabulary, has genuine text complexity in the topics addressed and layers of meaning.<sup>1</sup> Based on the YA literature students' responses, we surmise that *The Giver* may be more complex than the majority of upper-elementary, middle school, and possibly even younger high school readers can appreciate. Perhaps as whole-class or group literary study, *The Giver* might be comprehended, enjoyed, appreciated, and memorable in the upper grades of high school. By examining the adults' reflections of their current and previous transactions (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995) with *The Giver*, we argue a case for this particular text's inclusion at the upper levels of high school (grades 10–12). Although *The Giver* will be our primary example, many YA titles are legitimately complex and rigorous for literary study in secondary schools. Their addition to curricula would do much to broaden and diversify the list of suggested texts from the CCSS.

1 The CCSS use Lexile® text measures determined by word frequency and sentence length. *The Giver*'s Lexile® text measure is 760L (Lexile®), at the gr. 4–5 complexity level, according to the CCSS chart (Lexile® Find Book, 2012; Lexile Text Complexity, 2012)—not ideal grades at which to study this novel.

## **Psychological Development and Younger Readers**

In his response to *The Giver*, future teacher Nathaniel wondered "if this book freaked any kids out." Many teachers agonize over their students' psychological readiness when determining whether or not to have their classes read *The Giver*. There are some mature and dark themes present in the text: government control, sexual arousal, disillusionment, infanticide, and geronticide (the killing of the elderly).

Consider that some readers encounter *The Giver* in fifth grade, perhaps at age ten. Nathaniel also wrote, "From a psychological standpoint, kids reading this book for school would just be entering into Piaget's last step of cognitive development." According to Piaget, the last stage of development is the formal operational stage, which typically is not entered until age 11 or so. At this stage of development, an adolescent is capable of abstract reasoning and can "consider implications and incompatibilities, think hypothetically, search for alternatives, and reject inappropriate solutions without physically needing to test them" (Bohlin, Durwin, & Reese-Weber, 2009, p. 123). Students who are entering the formal operational stage are just beginning to have the skills they will need to make sense of a complex text.

*The Giver* raises many questions that younger students do not spend the majority of their time ruminating over—such as the form of society, individuality, and the cost of choice—other than at the level of their own social circles. Students at young ages may not be emotionally or cognitively developed enough to handle the subject matter. Preteen and teen readers often read books with protagonists near their own age, so it makes sense, considering that Jonas is 12, that the book would seem appropriate for this age group. After all, wouldn't they be more likely to empathize with Jonas? Would he not have similar concerns and cares to a typical preteen? On the surface, yes, but Jonas and readers live in very different societies. Jonas experiences the emotional complexities of a drugged, sterile populace and receives intense memories of experiences that none of his peers, "family unit," or community have ever known. He is isolated and incredibly different from an average reader in a modern setting.

Sarah, who read the book in sixth grade and

remembered very little of the novel, commented that she would teach the book at a much older age when students could consider “lying, loneliness, loss, and so much more.” Not to underestimate the experiences of younger students, but lying, loss, and loneliness take on vastly different meanings to Jonas. As Jessie reminds us, Jonas’s world is shaken when he reads his job instructions: “8. You may lie” (Lowry, 1993, p. 54). What, then, of his parents and all the other adults he has trusted? The foundation of all he has known has collapsed. Deborah Appleman (2009) warns that even older teens are disturbed by the literary theory of deconstruction, when everything they have known is now uncertain, and lack of closure reigns. How much more difficult and disturbing might these ideas be for younger readers of *The Giver*?

### **Literary Complexity: Dealing with Layers of Meaning and Ambiguity**

As with any excellent novel, *The Giver* may be read on many levels. Readers may enjoy the plot, but some may miss the literary richness the book has to offer. For Laurel, *The Giver* was “like when I read *Beowulf* and Shakespeare when I was younger; I enjoyed them then, but I didn’t fully understand them. I feel like I got a better grasp of the story as an adult.” To directly compare this YA text to such complex classics speaks volumes. Laurel had read *The Giver* in middle school, but did not remember “many specifics other than the snow at the end.” Similarly, Jessie wrote that she had read *The Giver* “sometime in middle school,” but was not sure she had ever finished the book.

Contrary to the majority of the YA lit students, Elizabeth and Jennifer did remember reading *The Giver*, with Jennifer noting, “even now I can still recall how it struck a chord somewhere deep within me,” but “I don’t think that I quite understood all of the things the book was trying to tell me.” For Abigail, the powerful literary style and issues addressed in *The Giver* may have been confusing, and she commented that “. . . (I was very naïve), and what I did not understand, I didn’t like.” While a few students were able to enjoy *The Giver* at a younger age, most were not.

One scene students remarked upon with a high frequency was the ending of the novel. The narrative is intentionally ambiguous—an intriguing challenge

for some mature readers who have a taste for close reading to seek clues to a more definitive ending. For younger readers, the ending may prove a source of confusion or dislike of the book as a whole. As a first-time reader of the book, Jacob wrote, “We are left—no pun intended—out in the cold! Did Jonas and Gabriel die?” The ending is ambiguous, leaving Jonas and Gabe on a snowy slope with a sled, an item that he recalled from a memory that was transmitted, but not something that existed within his real life in the Community, and the faint sound of music. The ending could be a dream or hallucination, it could be a vision in death, or it could be reality—in which case the world outside of the Community is not as Jonas was led to believe, thus making the reader wonder which scenario it is.

Megan commented that the ending gave her no “closure.” As a younger reader, Abigail found “the ending left me unsatisfied.” Elizabeth wrote “how frustrating it was to not know if Jonas and the baby died or actually made it to their destination. I still don’t know.” The ending has the power to color the entire parting message of the book, depending upon which scenario the reader chooses to believe. Gwen divulged, “the ending is so sad to me and almost frustrating in a way.”

Even as adults, ambiguity can be hard to tackle, but it seems more difficult for younger readers. Rebecca wrote that in sixth grade she “mostly just didn’t like the ending. It was too unclear.” Mary brought up the point that “the next generation of readers—who enjoy unprecedented, immediate access to answers to any question—are likely [to be] disturbed by the ambiguity.” A student who learns that there is a right answer for questions may not be able to see that for some questions, there are no definitive answers and no one solution. Students may have even more difficulty with ambiguity if taught that only one correct interpretation of literature exists (Booth, 1995), which is often the way rigorous, complex texts are taught. Though some of the adults in the YA literature classes

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would have preferred a more definitive ending, they typically still found *The Giver* to be an excellent read, appreciated far more than when they had read the book as a younger student.

## **Emotional Complexity: Memories—and Lack Thereof—of Intense Moments**

For a text as well written and emotionally charged as *The Giver*, it is not surprising that the adult read-

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ers were greatly moved during their reading. The most harrowing moment depicts Release—the appalling scene of infanticide when Jonas’s father puts the baby’s corpse in the trash chute and waves “bye-bye” (Lowry, 1993, p. 151). Susan stated, “I was just as shocked the second time at how the community disposes of the old and those that are released.” Even knowing the

plot from a previous read, Susan still found Lowry’s writing exceptionally hard-hitting. Elizabeth found it “horrifying.” Vaughn empathized to the point that he felt “beyond angry” at this scene. Jonas’s epiphany of what Release truly is screams off the page, “*He killed it! My Father killed it!*” (Lowry, 1993, p. 150, original emphasis). Jonas’s shock and mortification parallel the adult readers’ responses.

As intense as this scene is, some adults did not even remember this moment from reading *The Giver* at a younger age. Could it be that some younger readers block out these disturbing scenes, thus forgetting much of the book, as was the case for two of these adult readers? Gwen wrote, “I remembered there was something bad about this process [Release]. . . . I almost wanted to believe I was thinking of something else, or had my stories mixed up.” Laurel definitely blocked out the horror: “I honestly don’t remember [the baby’s murder] from years ago, and that surprises me, because it literally makes me sick to read it.” Judging by the adults’ responses to reading about how Jonas witnessed his father, brainwashed, willingly injecting an infant’s head with lethal fluids, it seems

plausible that younger students would try to forget the scenes that disturbed them so much. The power of this moment is in part what draws us in so poignantly as adult readers, whereas, for younger students, this moment may be enough to want to forget much of the book entirely.

## **Powerful Responses of Adult Readers**

### **Connections**

Just as readers are mortified right along with Jonas at the discovery of the “Release” of the baby, the adults’ responses expressed further connections to Jonas. Many see *The Giver* as a novel for younger readers based on Jonas’s age—despite other novels with young protagonists that are taught at older ages, such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1885/1996) or *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960/2002). Lowry remarked that she enjoys “writing about protagonists who are 12 or thereabouts because at that age they seem to combine the characteristics of childhood . . . idealism, ingenuousness, curiosity . . . with the beginning of a more sophisticated view of the world” (L. Lowry, personal communication, May 28, 2012). Jonas painfully (literally and figuratively) encounters this more sophisticated view of the world due to his role in the society. Though he is only 12, many adult students voiced a feeling of similarity between themselves and Jonas based on their life experiences.

Jonas is forced to handle serious responsibilities and grapple with the understanding that his society is flawed, despite being raised from birth to believe it perfect. While developmentally, readers around Jonas’s age will be experiencing greater responsibilities and more cognitive and emotional maturity than they had in earlier childhood, older readers are capable of a better understanding of the situations in which Jonas is placed. For example, Meyshia pondered her own mortality and the ritual storytelling of the Olds. She noted that she would “relish the thought of being able to attend [her] own funeral.” Further, she wondered if the Olds knew their lives were ending, or if they were “just tired of living and maybe that they wanted everything to end.” Thoughts of their own and others’ mortality are not often, we hope, on the minds of younger readers.

Adults’ life experience through political involve-

ment and knowledge can also play into a deeper understanding of the novel. Younger readers in upper elementary, middle school, and even into high school are usually uninformed on the nuances of political issues and the running of government beyond the basics; furthermore, typically not until the senior year of high school do students take a course in government, when they consider issues beyond their own microcosm. Considering the utopian society, Olivia wrote, “When I was younger . . . I can remember feeling that the Community was the epitome of everything bad and wrong,” but as an adult she could see benefits of the society in which Jonas lived—though she also recognized the flaws and was frightened by the appeal of Jonas’s society.

With greater understanding of the suffering in the world, the idea of a world without pain *is* appealing. When faced with the distress of poverty, famine, disease, and death, not having complete freedom of choice seems an acceptable option to eliminate these harsh realities. Alexa commented on the diversity of opinions of government: “My ‘utopia’ is different than everyone else’s, and more important, I believe my idea of ‘utopia’ has changed throughout my life.” One person’s “utopia” may consist of a society centered around sports, while an avid reader may long for a world filled only with books. The political preferences and personal “utopia” of the readers can make them more, or less, accepting of the way Jonas’s society is run.

In comparison to the United States, Jonas’s community is painfully empty of freedom. However, when compared to other countries, the society seems relatively normal. Most older readers are aware of the cultural allusions that Lowry plays upon in her book: China has a law limiting the number of children a family can have, many nations limit free speech and censor media, and arranged marriages still take place. In a post-9/11 world, we here in the US, too, have our trade-offs for protection and freedom. Younger students have a knee-jerk reaction that this lack of choice is wrong, and that is all there is to it. The adult students (though most still disliked the society) could understand the reasoning, or at the very least thought to question how it came about. Cultural understanding and varied political opinions led the adults to delve more deeply beyond the younger students’ superficial reaction and to seek comprehension. As Sabrina

stated, “Every day governments make decisions based on the greater good.” Political preferences and personal beliefs certainly shape the reader’s opinion of the society in *The Giver*.

### Empathy

Life and literary experiences typically heighten empathy, and older readers are often capable of a deeper reading of the text.

We don’t mean to minimize the understanding younger readers may have *as younger readers*, but the adults’ memories of their preteen and teenage readings along with their current readings of *The Giver* argue for its depth and complexity. The heavy topics facing Jonas allow older readers to relate to him and his role, regard-

less of his age. Georgina stated that she was “confused and angered right along with Jonas.” Some of the YA lit students stated that they empathized with Jonas, and if in the same situation would have chosen the same path. Rosalind mentioned that “[i]f I lived in a world like that and was given the same knowledge . . . I would want to escape, also.”

Younger readers, while they may have understood the plot in general, may not be able to imagine Jonas’s situation or how they would have reacted if given his knowledge and responsibilities. In his training to be the future Receiver for the rest of his life, Jonas is being given the entire knowledge of the society and its past—an incredible burden for any one person, let alone a child. Older readers, already employed or seriously considering a specific career path, can better understand the responsibility placed upon Jonas. Younger readers may not have a vision of what their future holds and may respond differently to the assignment of a lifelong position at an age so close to their own. While many younger readers, when prompted, might happily claim that they wish to become a rock star, or the president, plenty of others would recoil at the idea of having their entire life decided by others—particularly when in the “rebellious” phase of adolescence.

Like Jonas, though to a lesser degree, older read-

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ers have carried their own burdens and those of others. Do younger readers grasp what it might be like for one person to carry the mental and physical memories of all of society's history, perhaps days of slavery or genocide? Jill, who hadn't read the book when she was younger, stated that she was glad she first read it as an adult, noting that "some young readers may lack the life experience necessary in order to appreciate the more nuanced references and overtones that I enjoyed in the story."

### Insights and Questions

Other insights emerged from first-time and repeat adult readers of *The Giver*. Sabrina, who had not read the book before the YA lit class, commented that she "did not expect the power [*The Giver*] had from the first page," later noting the tremendous craft of Lowry as a writer. Rebecca stated that she found symbolism and allusions to Christianity that she had missed in

the previous reading. Regarding her multiple readings of *The Giver*, Olivia stated, "I love it when you pick up a book you've read a hundred times and every time you open the front cover to begin, a brand new book is waiting inside for you." This aligns with Louise Rosenblatt's (2005) transactional theory and her assertion that "reading is always a particular event involving a particular reader at a particular time under particular circumstances" (p. 35). With every event, thought, relationship, and experience, we are given more tools for understanding literature and the world around us. If *The Giver* offers enrichment on every subsequent reading, it is indeed an enduring text.

Excellent novels leave us pondering them long after the final page. Nathaniel linked his questions specifically to the age of readers:

After I read this book, I spent a couple of hours on what I was thinking . . . Honestly, I had so many questions, thoughts, and comments that I didn't know what to do with all of them. However, one unifying thing stood out during my thought process. I kept wondering how all of these questions would've changed, or how my experience would've changed if I had read this book between the 11-14-year-old version of me.

Indeed, what might be gained or lost by reading this book at various ages? Do younger readers often "spend a couple of hours" thinking after their reading? What might be gained from rereading as older high school students or adults?

Almost all of the adults' responses conveyed that they had questions while reading. Some mentioned the specifics of how the society actually ran. Susan considered the role of the Elders: "It made me wonder if the Elders were aware of the truth and so made rules knowingly and calculatingly, or if in their training, as they replaced the Elders before them, they were just handed down the emotionless list of rules and directions and so continued on in naiveté." Jacob was so curious about the unknowns of the book that he researched in attempts to learn more about "the history of Jonas's communal society of sameness."

Many pondered the form of the society, individuality, and the cost of choice. Jill found herself asking what she deemed the "central question: 'What necessitated the Sameness and how was it achieved?'" These topics may be considered by younger readers—in fact, some students mentioned having outrage when younger at the lack of choice—but younger readers would be more likely to focus on the topics in relation to how they affect them personally, as opposed to the effect on society as a whole. In contrast, Nancy asks, "[W]ould life really be better if we never experienced pain, loss, grief—if we never experienced truth?" With utopian and dystopian stories, a fine line is walked to determine if the end justifies the means. In *The Giver*, readers wonder if the suffering of one to ensure blissful ignorance of many is worth it, if "perfect" job placements and family assignments offset the elimination of choice and the moral implications involved in maintaining a state of "perfection." While reading, Jane asked a very troubling question, "[W]hat is the meaning of these characters' lives?" Jonas's world not only requires readers to come to terms with the dystopia of his community, but also the failings of the past society that created the world in which he now lives.

### Taking a Stand for YA Literature as Complex Texts

The call for manuscripts for this issue asks, "As we pursue the next trend in young adult literature, what

should we be careful not to lose?” In spite of good intentions of rigor and complexity, we must not overlook whole fields of literature due to the age of protagonists and the label of YA lit. *The Giver* is a classic, just as powerful today as in its publication year of 1993. The call for manuscripts also asks, “What will our future roles as young adult literature advocates be and with whom should we be forging relationships?” YA literature advocates must forge “relationships” with the CCSS, laying bare the ways that the field does indeed meet the rigors of complex texts. If adults have enriching, complex transactions with *The Giver*, surely the text is appropriate for high schoolers as well. As Abigail wrote,

This was my third read-through of *The Giver*. The first time I read it as a freshman in high school. I remember disliking it. . . . The second time I read the novel *The Giver* was for a 200-level literature course at [a community college]. . . . By that point, I had studied other books that dealt with utopia type themes as well as dystopias . . . . With all of the new knowledge during the second reading, I enjoyed the novel more, but I still didn’t understand why *The Giver* is so highly regarded. . . . Now, after my third reading of the book, I think I understand . . . . I was amazed at how well everything fell together in the book. . . . It felt complete because I was finally able to see it in a different light.

Early in her college studies prior to our YA literature class, Abigail had not encountered the book powerfully enough for her to appreciate not only the themes but also Lowry’s craft and style. Her rereadings, along with her literary experience, led her to a fulfilling literary transaction. Why would we deny the depth of such experiences by prohibiting the literary study of books such as *The Giver* with our high school students?

The field has increasing numbers of proponents for the inclusion of YA literature in high schools (Soter & Connors, 2009; Atwell, 2007; Johnson & Ciancio 2010). Although the CCSS note that its examples of appropriately complex texts are just that, examples, teachers may feel pressured not to stray from the recommended titles. Similarly, although the CCSS specify three factors to be taken into account when considering text complexity (qualitative aspects, quantitative measures, and individual reader and task traits), it seems the reader’s individual factors may get lost in a curriculum designed to be more and more rigorous for a generic student in any given grade. The best inten-

tions of standards and curricula often lose ground to the reality of funding cuts that can accompany low standardized test scores.

We lose much—in particular the chance to create lifelong readers—if we narrow the secondary school curriculum to canonical texts only. The CCSS “Appendix B: Text Exemplars and Sample Performance Tasks” (2012a) for stories, drama, and poetry for grades 11–CCR seems particularly suited to *The Giver*. The tasks ask students to consider how protagonists “maintain their integrity when confronting authority” [RL.11–12.9] (2012, p. 163). Jonas’s figurative and literal journeys deal directly with his integrity as he challenges authority. Students should also be able to “analyze how *over the course of the text* different characters try to escape the worlds they come from, including whose help they get and whether anybody succeeds in escaping” [RL.11–12.2] (2012, p. 163, original emphasis). This task was specified for *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925/1995), but clearly the world of *The Giver* would work well.

Students are also asked to analyze the impact of “. . . *language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful* to convey . . . *multiple meanings*” [RL.11–12.4] (2012, p. 164, original emphasis). Lowry’s diction, unique to the narrative, certainly fits the bill here. While classics should not, of course, be eliminated from the curriculum, many excellent YA novels could further the literary study of all secondary students. Teachers need not fear straying from the CCSS example text list to help their students meet the critical thinking tasks set forth in the standards.

As noted earlier, *The Giver* is complex in many ways. YA novels are often far more complex than sentence length and word frequency reveal, and therefore (as the CCSS and Lexile® agree) should not be the sole factor in determining whole-class novels or group novels for literary study. Surely Lowry has received much mail from young readers who have been quite moved by *The Giver*. However, independent reading, such as in a reading workshop (Atwell, 2007), is an

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ideal environment for individuals to read far above their peers. Lexile® text measures (2012b) do not tell the whole story about a book's complexity, rigor, or sophistication. Simply because a 2nd–4th grader *can* read *Speak* (Anderson, 2001)—a National Book Award Finalist—does this mean the book is the best choice for most readers (or any readers) in those grades?

Soter and Connors (2009) argue for the inclusion of YA literature in high schools primarily due to its literary merit. Of those unaware of the depth of many YA works, they claim, “[t]hat literature for adolescents might be stylistically complex, that it might withstand rigorous critical scrutiny, and that it might set forth thoughtful social and political commentaries has simply not occurred to them” (p. 63). We do our students a disservice if we foolishly sweep away decades of high-quality YA literature simply because of their labels of “young adult” or the age of protagonists.

If readers cannot fully comprehend or cope with the issues in texts, they will simply not care about them, and as Lowry reminds us, “Of course they needed to care. It was the meaning of everything” (1993, p. 156). That is why *The Giver* endures: it has great meaning. The tragedy is the diminishing of that meaning when a reader is not ready or able to comprehend the text. This book is too good, too powerful, too thought-provoking—too *complex* not to be read by older teenagers and adults.

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